THE SEALED ENVELOPE

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BY

BEN BOLT

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THE SEALED ENVELOPE

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THE SEALED ENVELOPE

BY

BEN BOLT

WARD, LOCK & CO., LIMITED
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To
MR. AND MRS. HENRY LUPTON
WITH KIND REGARDS

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THE SEALED ENVELOPE

CHAPTER I

THE TRAP

THE night was very dark, the hour late, the road deserted; and with the lamps cutting out from the darkness an arch of light in front of him, the Hon. Gregory Melcombe let the Silver Eagle rip. There was no sound but the soft purr of the smooth-running engine, and the crisp crunch of gravel on the newly tarred road. Occasionally a rabbit, white and ghostly in the glare, stood for a moment in the middle of the road hypnotized, then bolted for the hedge. Once a small owl, blinded by the sudden blaze of light, flew perilously near the wind-screen; whilst the night moths dancing in the lane were caught in the radiator to perish, or swept aside by the wind of the car's swift passage, and left fluttering in its wake.

"Z-o-o-o-m-m!"

Melcombe, who had a flair for things mechanical and a lust for speed, loved that soft, deep-throated song which proclaimed the sweetness of the engine and the steadiness of the pace; and kept the Alvis consistently at

forty-five per hour; eating up the miles as if he were hungry to be done with them.

As a matter of fact, he had no occasion for hurry. That day he had started a month's leave from duty; his time was his own; and if the hour were late, innkeepers could be awakened like other men, whilst unlike others they might charge for the loss of beauty sleep. He laughed at a remembrance that came to him of one of the clan who had refused to answer the summons of his own bell, when with petrol and oil running low he and Jack Hannaford had pulled up at an inn on the Bath Road. The bell, of an old-fashioned variety, had been pulled until the sudden yielding of the wire had deposited Hannaford in the road. That young gentleman, on the way to becoming an ornament in the Diplomatic Service, had waxed indignant and had attacked the door with hoof and claw. Still the landlord had clung to the sheets deaf to all the clamour of tired men. Then Hannaford had searched until he found a stone, which a moment later had made intimate acquaintance with an upper pane, filling the night with crashing sound. That the landlord had been foxing was clear from the celerity with which his tousled head had appeared at the window. He was in a passion; but Jack had soothed him with honeyed words that for a mere fledgling in diplomacy held promise of a great future; and in the end the yielding landlord had gone tipsy to bed with Hannaford holding the candle to light the stairs.

He laughed again. However late one might be, there were ways and means. . . . A white milestone flashed by, then a finger-post gaunt and ghostlike with its widespread arms. Beyond there was a crossing, and a little later he came to a descent. Somewhere ahead of him was the Dart with a narrow bridge and an awkward turn at each end. Remembering that, he slackened speed a little. He did not know the road, but the map had told him that a mile or two before he reached the bridge the road forked, and that his way lay on the right. Slowing down still more, he began to watch for the fork; and inside a couple of minutes, saw a division ahead of him. Never doubting that here was the place he was looking for, he swung right; and even as he did so, perceiving white letters on a dark gate in the shadow of trees, knew that he had made a mistake, and that he was in some private road.

He had scarcely realized the fact, and was in the act of shifting his foot from the accelerator to the brake when he visioned a startling thing. Not five yards ahead, a little below the level of his wind-screen, stretching right across the road was a bright line, which gleamed and danced in the glare of his headlights. In a flash the truth was borne upon him.

"Wire!" he ejaculated.

Automatically his right foot jammed down the brake lever, his left went to the clutch, whilst one hand shut off the engine. At the same time he ducked his head. It was all done in two seconds of time, but the momentum was

too great for the car to be pulled up in the space available. There was a crash. The wind-screen went like paper. The car swerved to the left, then struck something, and he was thrown violently from his seat with his head against the door. For one flashing moment he saw a world of whirling stars; then, as he lost consciousness, utter darkness supervened.

Some minutes later when he opened heavy eyes the stars were gone, and he was lying on his back on grass, conscious only of two things: a head that ached intolerably, and a stillness that was like that of a cemetery at midnight. Vaguely he wondered where he was, and stretching a hand encountered the branch of a shrub. He tried the other hand and found himself clawing gravel, but the double effort was almost too much for him, and he was very near fainting again. He closed his eyes, endeavouring to get a grip on himself, and as he did so caught two or three sounds almost simultaneously—the soft purr of a motor engine, the crunching of gravel under several feet, and voices.

What the latter said he could not catch, though he strained his ears. He was on the point of calling out when his mind functioned sharply, and as clearly as the reality he visioned that gleaming wire which had been the last thing to catch his eyes before the car crashed. That vision tied his tongue. Whoever the men were who had stretched that wire across the road, there must have been murder in their hearts; and if it should chance that those whose voices he heard were the culprits, it

behoved him to be still; and if possible learn their purpose. He closed his eyes and waited.

The footsteps came nearer, then unexpectedly a bright light was thrown on his face. He guessed a flashlight; and as it rested on his eyes, he had much to do to keep his eyelids from quivering. A man laughed harshly and, with the unmistakable accent of the United States, exclaimed: "We sure snared the wrong bird!"

"But who is the guy?" inquired a second voice.

"Gregory Melcombe——"

"An' who the brimstone is——"

"Search me. There's an insurance certificate in the car with the name inscribed. Guess this is the owner of the monnicker."

"Means that Linky's slipped by us, I guess."

"Or ain't comin'. That's the likelier story. An' the quicker we hop it the better. . . . That auto looks like a speeder, an' it ain't damaged in its vitals. . . . We don't want to be caught with a corpse on our hands—an' one that we ain't got a morsel of interest in. The cops on this side are so mortal particular——"

The light which had tried Melcombe severely was switched off; he drew a long and silent breath of relief, and waited to hear what might follow.

"Have another look round before we quit, I guess."

"May as well. Linky may be foxin' somewhere round."

The two men moved away, and as they did so, Gregory Melcombe opened his eyes. His

mind was now functioning normally, and he did some rapid thinking. The men who had held the cursory post-mortem over him thought that he was dead. That they were of ruffianly breed was certain ; and it was dazzlingly clear that, failing to find Linky—whoever he might be—they proposed to depart at once in his Alvis, leaving him, if he were able, to toddle away on his pins.

The last consideration pricked him like a spur. He was not going to be left in the middle of nowhere to find his way out on his feet. Besides, the Alvis was indispensable for the holiday on which he had started ; which would be quite ruined if he had to hang about whilst the police sought to recover his stolen car. There was a better way—not to have the car filched at all.

He swung himself into a sitting posture ; and then gingerly lifted himself to his feet. He stood for a moment steadying himself and fighting down the dizziness that troubled him, then keeping to the grass, began to move forward in the direction whence came the purr of the running engine. He had as it chanced no great way to go. He caught a whiff from the exhaust ; and then saw the dim outline of the car. It had, he realized, been turned, and now was headed for the gate by which he had entered. So much the better, he thought to himself. He would have nothing to do but climb in, put the car into gear and—— He remembered the wire suddenly. That might still be up, and in that case—m——

Before the thought was completed the fear of the hindering possibility was removed. His foot touched something that gave a faint metallic sound. He stooped and, groping, found a coil of wire, one end of which as he traced it was still fastened round the trunk of a tree.

"Good!"

He moved forward again, and when a little nearer the car halted to stare in the darkness for any sign of watchers. He saw no one and went forward confidently. He reached the car, realized from the sound of the running engine that the bonnet was open, and as quickly as possible stepped on to the gravel and moved round to close it, before he slipped to the wheel.

He was so engaged, stooping a little, when the bright ray of an electric torch cut the darkness, and a rallying voice fell on his ears.

"What's the great idea, brother?"

The surprise was complete. He had not even time to turn. Something soft and heavy smote him on the back of the head just above the nape of the neck, and he collapsed on the Alvis wing, lying across it as a loosely filled sack might have done.

This time the return to consciousness was delayed, for that blow had been delivered by an expert. When it did occur Gregory Melcombe lay quite still for a time, pondering matters, and listening very intently. He heard nothing but the hooting of owls somewhere quite close. Remembering the Alvis, he strained his ears, and sniffed the air for any sign of it. Both senses drew a blank, and since apparently he

had the night to himself, with an effort he raised himself and looked round.

The earth seemed to be whirling on its axis a good deal. He felt like a man on a joy-wheel, and with a feeling that he might be shot off at a tangent clutched at the gravel in an instinctive effort to avert the catastrophe. But even as he did so, in the midst of the whirl he glimpsed a light which seemed to come through trees, and with a great effort kept his eyes on it; until his whirling world slackened and finally stood still.

"There is a light! . . ." He assured himself. "And a light may mean a house . . . I've got to get there—somehow."

Five minutes later, he was moving a little tipsily up the gravelled drive, a much-shaken man; but, notwithstanding his uncertain steps, in full possession of his wits. Tom-toms were beating in his head; he had a feeling of nausea which threatened to become eruptive, but his brain was working clearly, his will asserting itself against the weakness which seemed to come upon him in waves. He lost sight of the light which had attracted his attention, but did not allow the fact to disturb him. This private road, he reasoned, must lead to a house. He had but to follow it to arrive, and follow it he did, slowly, yet doggedly, resolved to reach the house even if he had to crawl on hands and knees.

There was, however, no need for that strenuous course. A turn in the road brought the light into view again; and he saw that it came from

the mullioned window of a house which everywhere else was in darkness. He paused for a moment whilst he considered the place; then getting a grip on himself, stumbled forward anew.

In three minutes he found himself on a gravelled terrace, with the lighted window not more than a couple of yards away, with, as he guessed, the door of the house somewhere beyond. He moved towards the window, his uncertain steps making a great clatter in the gravel. Anyone in that lighted room he thought must hear him; but when he drew level with the window he changed his mind on that. There was someone in the room—a man, and clearly he was either deaf or so absorbed in what he was doing as to be oblivious of any noise outside the house.

The room, a library, apparently, was lit by candles in silver sconces; a quite elegant candelabra occupied the centre of the old refectory table, whilst there was a smaller one on the top of an old bureau, where the man was seated, apparently busy with some papers. Melcombe stared at him for a moment or two, without getting a glimpse of his face; then feeling himself growing weaker, stumbled forward once more.

He found the great door set in a stone arch, and groping for a bell-push, found instead the iron studs of an ancient door. Further gropings brought to his knowledge an iron bell-pull of antique pattern, and with one hand on the stonework to steady himself, with the other he tugged good and hard. The result was a

clamour that might have waked the seven sleepers—a deep-toned clanging that must have been heard all over the place.

He was a little appalled at the din he had made, and hurriedly removed his hand from the bell-pull, whilst with the other he steadied himself against the grooved stone lintel. He caught a sound of footsteps within—steps that were at once light and firm; heard a couple of bolts shoot back; a heavy key turn in the lock; then the door opened; and he saw a man standing there with a silver candlestick in one hand, whilst the other was held behind him. He glimpsed the man's face—lean, almost bony, with eyes of burning black set under cavernous brows, noted two gold-filled teeth that reflected the candle-light in a quite odd way, then he spoke.

"Good evening, sir. I am sorry to trouble you——" His voice shook with sudden weakness; he was afraid he was going to collapse; and again his hand sought the stonework for support. The man lighted the candle, considered him shrewdly, and then spoke.

"Say, stranger, you've been in a mix-up, haven't you?"

Melcombe got a grip on himself and grinned weakly.

"You may call it that! . . . Out in your drive——"

"Out in my drive!" There was amazement in the man's tones; then the black eyes flamed fiercely. "Perdition," he ejaculated. "Who the blazes are you?"

"Name of Melcombe—christening name Gregory. I've a card—somewhere—if——"

"Not necessary!" The other laughed shortly. "Face will pass you in, I guess, and—— Steady! You'll——"

The hand behind the man's back came swiftly to his side, and transferred something to his pocket—a pistol. Melcombe's mind registered, though for the moment the fact did not really interest him. He was trying desperately to keep a hold on himself, felt the hold slipping, and was more than grateful when the hand the other had freed came to his aid.

"Lean on me. You're a case for stimulant, and there's some topping old brandy."

He helped Melcombe through the doorway, and along a flagged hall hung with trophies to the door of the lighted room and inside.

"This chair, I think, Mr. Melcombe. If you want to faint it will be easier to put your chin between your knees for the revival act." The man laughed a little harshly. "But the brandy will do the trick, I hope."

As Melcombe sank in the divan chair, his host ran to the bureau. There was a decanter there; a syphon and glasses. He hastily slipped some of the spirit into a glass, dashed it with soda-water and hurried back.

"Swallow that! Will warm the cockles—and after we will talk."

Melcombe swallowed the brandy as ordered; felt the warm surge of it in his veins and inside three minutes was more his own man than he had been since striking that murderous wire.

"Feel the up-lift, hey?" asked his host. "Well, we'll complete the good work. Another tot——"

He replenished Melcombe's glass, swallowed a thimbleful of the spirit himself, and then inquired tersely:

"Ready to shoot, sonny?"

Melcombe was, and shot. The other listened to his story with growing wonder and suddenly broke out:

"Mean to say you've been counted out twice since you drove through them gates?"

"You've got it right."

"Must have the constitution of a buffalo! . . . Go on, strong man. What did you say was the name you overheard?"

"Linky."

"Linky—that's a momma's pet-name for Lincoln, I guess. Yes—er—— What's that?"

That was a slight creaking sound from the hall, but slight as it was it made the man as ferociously alert as a wounded tiger. He jumped to his feet, his eyes gleaming as they sought the door. Then as the creaking sound was renewed he laughed with sharp relief.

"The door! I forgot—and left it wide open to the night. Excuse me, my friend; I'll just slip out and fasten it."

He went out. Melcombe, to whom the brandy was proving its reputation as a stimulant, heard the door closed, the key turned, the bolts shot, and looked round the room. Everything in it was richly and tastefully appointed. The books in rare bindings lined the walls, but

above the mantelpiece was a portrait ; certainly not that of his host. The polished floor had a couple of Eastern rugs—Shiraz by the look of them ; the table spoke for itself—some old monastery had certainly contributed to the furniture of this splendid room. The chairs——

He forgot the shield-backs of the Hepplewhites in something that, though simple, struck him as a little odd. Over the back of one of the chairs was thrown a grey ulster that might have been the one he himself was wearing, and on the seat was a grey trilby hat of velour. His host, he reflected, must be a man of untidy habits ; or he had been in a great hurry to get to work at the bureau on entering the house. He had time for no further reflections as the man re-entered the room and addressed him genially.

" Feeling nearer O.K., hey ? . . . That hooch is prime stuff. Gets right where it's needed. . . . What you want now is a bed and a night's sleep——"

" My immediate want is a telephone to communicate with the police. I don't want to lose the Alvis and I must report the theft ! "

" Start the hue-an'-cry right off, you mean ? Well, that is sense. But you aren't fit to go calling up a sleepy police station. Just give me the particulars—number, colour and all the et ceteras, and I'll see to it for you."

Melcombe would have preferred to attend to the matter himself, but did not like to hurt his host's feelings by saying so ; and accordingly gave the particulars desired, which the other jotted down. Then the man spoke again.

"Now about that bed——"

"I don't like to trouble you——"

"Trouble!" The other laughed. "There's no trouble. There must be at least six beds in this house waiting for someone to crawl into them. The maids are away on holiday and old William—that's the butler—must be deep in his dreams; but I think I can find you what is required."

"Well, I must sleep somewhere, of course ——"

"Only thing after being sling-shotted, I should say. If you will just wait a moment I will fix the room."

The man departed, taking with him one of the candlesticks, and Melcombe, who was beginning to find the library a little stuffy, slipped off his overcoat and, laying it over his knees, again surveyed the room. The bureau at which the man had been working particularly drew his attention. There was a mass of papers there, others were thrown untidily on the floor. It looked as if the owner was having a spring-cleaning, going through the bureau, discarding documents and letters that were no longer needed or had lost their value. But he told himself that could scarcely be the case; for no man would start such a task in the small hours of the morning. Then he shrugged his shoulders. After all, it was no affair of his what this good Samaritan did. It was enough that he generously offered the hospitality to one who was in need, and didn't make any fuss.

Whilst he was so thinking his host returned,

saw the coat on his lap, and promptly hurried forward.

"Let me relieve you of that. Your hat——"

"Lost! But whether in the car or your drive I don't know."

"No matter." The man laughed. "No doubt William or I will be able to fix you up in the morning."

He moved away with the coat, saw his own coat and hat on the chair and, gathering them up, disappeared in the hall, returning a moment or two later.

"You will take a night-cap——" he began.

"Thank you, no."

"Then if you feel able——"

He took up a sconce with two candles and led the way.

"You will wonder I have such primitive lighting," he said smilingly as they reached the landing. "But the truth is, I hate electricity and consider gas just a substitute for hemp for men who haven't the courage to hang themselves. . . . There's the bathroom, and here's your bedchamber quite handy. You'll find soft slippers, pyjamas, and shaving tackle there. Anything else you need William will provide if you ask for it when he brings your morning tea. . . . I hope you will sleep well. Good night, Mr. Melcombe."

Before Melcombe could start to thank him, he closed the door and was moving along the gallery. Melcombe heard him reach the stairs, descend them, and a few seconds later caught the sound of a closing door on the floor below.

Apparently his host had still some work to do at the bureau in the library.

He looked round the room. It was expensively furnished with antique pieces which must have been worth a small fortune; but after that first swift appraisement he did not trouble himself with any appointments save the bed. That, which was a four-poster with delicate spirals to support the canopy, appealed to him strongly. He had never in all his life felt so tired and used-up; and with his head beating a very tattoo, he fairly yearned to lay it on a pillow.

In no time at all he had stripped, donned the silk pyjamas provided; and after putting the candle-sconce and his matches within reach of his hand, climbed into the high bed and, extinguishing the candles, laid down.

The pillow was soft and cool. It soothed his throbbing head, but sleep did not immediately come to him. He found himself reviewing the adventures of the night; wondering who were the men who had stretched that wire; and what man they had hoped to catch by their brutal device. No answers were forthcoming to those questions, and by a natural transition his thoughts turned to his host. A genial, hospitable fellow, he reflected, but with odd spots of mystery about him. He remembered that the man had not given his name, and that after his first surprise he had shown no great interest in the men who had been responsible for the disaster which had overtaken himself. Then—

"Great Jove!" he whispered sharply.

His mind had suddenly recalled the pistol he had seen the man thrust in his pocket, and the sharp question as to his visitor's identity on hearing of the "mix-up" in the drive. . . . There was something curious there—not so much in the pistol the man had held behind him whilst answering the door, as in the sudden fierce demand he had made. In so lonely a house, any man answering a summons in the dead of night might have fortified himself with a weapon; but the man's manner had been curious; he had certainly been startled to hear of those ruffians in the drive; and the very fierceness of his following question might very well be explained by apprehension. Did he know who the assailants were? When that ancient bell had clanged, had he anticipated that the summons was from someone whom he had cause to fear?

Melcombe found no answer to his questions, and presently laughed to himself. He was developing a vaulting imagination, and if he meant to sleep off the headache that he had, it was well to cease worrying over imagined possibilities.

Closing his eyes, he composed himself for sleep; but sleep would not come. Somewhere quite close the owls were hooting eerily; and once he would have sworn he heard a fox bark. There were odd noises in his room, the slight creakings that seem to be indigenous to old houses; the scampering of mice in the ceiling, and from one point a shrill whimpering which

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proclaimed a nest and a litter of young. Between them, these things, playing on his jarred nerves, sufficed to keep him awake; and so it fell that a full hour after seeking the sheets he heard that which was rather startling.

Downstairs there was a sound that he recognized instantly for that of a bolt sharply withdrawn. Then followed noises that he identified as made by the cautious opening and closing of a heavy door, and half a minute later he distinctly caught the tread of feet on the gravel under his window. Someone, it appeared, had left the house.

"Who?"

Not William the butler, he thought; more likely his host. But what could be taking him forth at so late an hour in the night, or so early in the morning? He glanced at the luminous dial of his watch. Two thirty-five! An unconscionable time for a man to leave his house; but possibly after his spell of work his host was just taking the air. He strained his ears for returning footsteps, but heard none; and presently drifted into slumber, out of which he was awakened suddenly by a great crash of falling glass.

CHAPTER II

A DESERTED HOUSE

HE sat bolt upright in the four-poster, staring into the darkness, his ears straining. For a long time he heard nothing further, and had almost persuaded himself that the crash belonged to the realm of dream, when there came a sound which he interpreted as that made by the raising of a window-sash. He whistled softly to himself and murmured:

"Burglars!"

His mind harked back to the men who had been responsible for his mishap. Had they returned to look for the man Linky for whom they had mistaken himself? It seemed more than possible. But where was William the butler? And where his host? The crash had been a very loud one, yet there was no sign that it had been heard by anyone but himself.

He listened for any sound of movement along the gallery where the other bedrooms were, but heard nothing; then with the idea that he must give the alarm he slipped out of bed, opened his door very quietly and stared forth.

The gallery and the hall below were in complete darkness and both were silent as the grave. He had no idea where the servants'

quarters were ; and he was not even sure that his host was in the house at all, since after his going forth he had not heard him return. Remembering that the butler was not aware of his presence in the house, and might mistake him for the nocturnal intruder against whom he meant to give warning, in something of a quandary he stood there debating the course of action to be followed ; and then befell a thing which he found infinitely intriguing.

A ray of light cut athwart the darkness below, danced on the glass of a picture for a second, and then wandered round the hall, here and there, resting momentarily now on this door, now on that. Amazed and curious, he watched that probing ray, which no doubt came from a flash-lamp, wondering whose hand directed it. Not that of his host, surely. Again he thought of the men who had been in the drive. One of them had possessed a flash-lamp. Was he the man who was hidden in the darkness of the hall ?

It seemed likely, and he was on the point of stepping to the rail when the wandering ray jerked upward, and raked the whole length of the gallery. He saw it coming, and slipped back behind the door, watched the light gleam through the opening and pass on ; then silently as a ghost he moved out to the gallery again.

Apparently satisfied with his inspection of the gallery, the intruder had withdrawn the light, and, as the motion of the latter showed, was now crossing the hall. Slipping to the rail, Melcombe stared down the well. He could see

nothing of the person holding the light ; and even whilst he was straining to do so the torch was switched off, intensifying the darkness by contrast.

But now there was a slight sound of movement. A door-handle clicked gently as it was cautiously turned, and the door itself creaked as it was opened—creaked portentously, as it seemed, in that silent house. Then followed a period of silence ; and Melcombe conceived the nocturnal prowler as standing there, heart in mouth, listening to learn if the sound had been heard. Apparently the intruder was satisfied at last, for again the door creaked, and the ray of light stabbed the darkness anew, directed, as he guessed, into the room, the door of which had been opened.

It was so directed but for a moment, then, being withdrawn, wandered round the hall ; the person who held it no doubt considering the doors of the various rooms afresh. There followed a thing which interested him enormously. The light at rather close range fell on a mirror hanging on the wall, and for perhaps two seconds or three was thrown back at such an angle as to fall on the face of the person holding the lamp, sufficiently so as to make possible a dim image of the face in the mirror. Vague and ghostlike the face showed in the depth of the mirror—very pale, as it seemed, with wide dark eyes. That was all he could make out before the light shifted, extinguishing the image ; and a moment later, the person, whose face he had seen so indistinctly, moved

to another of the doors ; opened it with infinite caution ; examined the interior by the aid of the lamp, and passed inside.

Melcombe recalled as well as he could the order of the doors as one entered the hall, and reached the conclusion that the room which the intruder had entered was the one with which he himself had made acquaintance.

" The library ! " his mind registered silently.

He waited a moment or two, and, at last, assured that the intruder was not emerging immediately, he slipped along the gallery, and reaching the stairs, descended to the hall. There again he waited, listening, and after a little time caught the rustling of papers. Someone besides his host, it appeared, was interested in the contents of the bureau.

He began to move from the stairs across the hall to the door of the library. His bare feet made absolutely no sound ; and he was guided on his way by the faint illumination which came through the crack of the door which had been left ajar. Reaching it, he stood on the mat immediately outside, to listen again.

The rustling of papers continued. Intensely interested and curious, he tried to look into the room, but the angle of the door afforded no view save a shadowy one of bookshelves. To learn who the intruder was it would be necessary to enter or to wait until he came out and then surprise him. The latter course seemed to him the most prudent as well as the surest ; and standing on the mat, he waited as patiently as he could for the revealing moment.

It was an unconscionable time in coming. There was a sudden whirring sound in the hall, a sharp movement in the library, and his heart leaped violently. Then there followed slowly the wheezy strokes of a grandfather's clock recording the hour.

"One! Two! Three!"

Beyond the door there sounded a subdued laugh of relief; a laugh the quality of which was utterly startling in its femininity.

"My hat! A woman!" he whispered under his breath, and his curiosity deepened sevenfold.

He found his impatience mounting; and when the rustling of papers ceased and there followed a clicking sound which puzzled him utterly, he found it insupportable. He must learn what was happening in the room—must see that woman's face. He edged silently to the opening of the door, put his back against the jamb, and began to worm his way in, without moving the door. It was a tight fit, but he just managed it, and, once clear, lightly as a cat took a couple of paces forward; then stopped in wonder at the sight that met his eyes.

A section of one of the bookcases had swung open on hinges, and behind was the green door of a safe. He knew it was a safe, for on her knees before it, dimly seen by the reflected light, was the woman, with her torch directed on the front of the safe; head bent forward to listen to the fall of the tumblers, whilst she turned the dial, searching for the combination.

For the next minute or so Melcombe was too

amazed to make any movement. He stood there in the dark wondering what the woman wanted, how she had chanced to know the whereabouts of that masked safe, and whether she was merely the common, garden burglar in petticoats or one whose safe-cracking had some other than a get-rich-quick motive. Of one thing he was certain, she was not acquainted with the combination that would open the safe, for whilst he watched she made an impatient movement and an ejaculation broke from her in one explosive whisper :

" Oh, damn ! "

She cocked her head as if in thought, and at the same time moved her torch. For one second its light revealed the face that he so desired to see—a face that even in that hard light had a lustrous whiteness, with the great dark eyes that he had seen reflected in the mirror. The vision afforded him was but momentary ; but as she dipped her head again and directed her torch anew on the dial, it left him stunned ; for the face that he had seen was that of no hardened woman crook, but of a girl not more than twenty years of age.

More intrigued than ever, he continued to watch her, debating with himself whether he ought to interfere immediately or wait to see if she succeeded in her efforts ; and whilst he debated the girl moved suddenly ; lifted her head, half turned in his direction to listen, then followed a faint click and the light went out.

Had she seen him ? He did not know, but

it seemed likely ; and he was on the point of addressing her, when there broke on his ears the sound of heavy feet on the gravel outside. That checked the words on his lips. Here was the explanation of the sudden extinguishing of the torch. The girl, nearer the window, alert even in her absorption, had heard those footsteps a second before he had caught them. But who was the person outside—his host or—— Before the question was completed he was able to guess the answer, for the darkness was broken by rays of light which streamed from outside through the window, and which proclaimed that someone, either his host or the girl, had drawn the curtains since last he was in the room.

" Policeman ! "

As his mind found the answer to his question, he wondered whether the officer suspected anything was wrong in the house ; or was merely going his ordinary round ? Then quite suddenly he remembered the broken window. If the policeman—as he guessed the man outside to be—went the round of the house, flashing his light, he must inevitably discover that ; and an immediate alarm would follow. The certainty of that awoke in him an odd concern for the girl safe-breaker. That she was just an ordinary thief seemed to him more than doubtful—for the reason that he had never heard of a woman burglar, and found it inconceivable that a girl so young could be a Bill Sikes in petticoats. He had an unreasoning desire to save her from the consequences of

her folly; but how to do so was not immediately apparent to him.

The light outside was withdrawn, and again there was the sound of steps going along the terrace. Quite clearly he heard them mount the stone steps, and distinctly caught the noise of a heavy latch as someone tried the door. If that door opened——

The thought was incomplete when within the room there was the faintest sound of movement. He could see nothing in the blackness and what he heard told him little. He guessed that the girl might be making for the door, and he turned towards it himself, but even as he did so, heard the door softly closed. He moved quickly, lost his sense of direction in the darkness and found himself against the bookcases which lined the wall. He groped his way along them feeling for the door, stubbed his toe against an unseen chair, and then heard the man outside move heavily along the terrace and away from the house.

He found the door at last, and, stepping quickly into the hall, listened. The house was silent as the grave. He waited perfectly motionless for two minutes cherishing the hope that the girl might still be in the hall waiting for the policeman to get well away from the house, and that when she moved he would hear her. He was disappointed in that expectation; but at the end of the time he had news of her, for light feet passed the hall door in the opposite direction to that taken by the policeman, and he knew that she had left the house and was,

so far as he was concerned, safely away, since to pursue her barefooted and in pyjamas was unthinkable.

Uncertain what to do, he felt his way to the staircase, and with his foot on the bottom step stared upward. It seemed desirable that he should inform his host of what had happened, but he was by no means sure that the man was in the house, and it was necessary to make certain of that first. Groping his way back to his room, he found the matches, lit the candles in his branched candlestick and went out to the gallery again. Four doors besides his own were offered to his choice ; and at the far end of the gallery was a short corridor leading, as he guessed, to the servants' quarters. After consideration he moved to each door in turn, listening. A tag of some poet came to his mind as he stood there with his ear against the first door—" the drowsy sound of neighbouring sleep," but though he tried each door in turn, he heard nothing of any sleeper who might be a-bed behind the doors. Then methodically he tapped on each door one after the other ; and after receiving no response, turned the handle and, opening the door, peered into the room to find it unoccupied. So with all—except the last one, which was locked with the key outside.

He stared at the key for a little time, wondering whether he ought to turn it, and look in the room ; but after consideration decided against doing so, as it was obvious that no man could have locked the door from the inside ; whilst it was one thing to try to find his

host in his bedroom, but an entirely different one to go prying into a locked room.

He walked a little way down the corridor to a point where a glazed door cut the corridor in two. The door he found was locked; and the only way to reach any rooms beyond was to find the servants' staircase. Again recalling that he was unknown to the butler who was unaware of his presence in the house, that was a course which did not commend itself to him; and he turned back with the intention of seeking his own chamber. Plainly his host, whom he had heard go forth, had not yet returned to the house, and until he did it was not possible for him to report what had happened.

As he reached his own door, it occurred to him that it might be well to take a look round the library before going back to bed, particularly as for the moment it seemed that he was thrust into the position of being his host's deputy. Accordingly he descended the staircase, and in the poor light of his two candles glanced round the hall. There was nothing there to hold his attention, and passing into the library he lit the candles which stood on the table, and, that done, inspected the room carefully.

His first glance was for the bureau. The papers he had observed on his first entrance were still there; but now it seemed to him that there were more on the floor than had previously been the case; as if they had been swept off by some impatient or careless hand. Then he moved to the place where the safe

was. The section of the bookcase still stood wide open; and the safe was there, its steel door fast closed, in spite of the efforts of the fair intruder to open it.

As he stared at it something on the carpet caught his eye—a wisp of silk. Retrieving it, he found it was a lady's handkerchief, faintly perfumed with lavender, with no monogram or any indication of the owner. But of the latter he had no doubt whatever. That girl had knelt there in front of the safe, and beyond question had left the little square of silk behind her. He laughed to himself as he considered it.

"Well," he whispered, "at any rate it won't hang her." Crumpling the handkerchief in his hand, he continued his inspection, without finding anything else to interest him; and finally extinguishing the candles he had lit, he returned to his room. There he lit a cigarette, and finding his feet very cold, slipped into bed, and lay there propped up on his elbow, considering the odd things of the night.

The more he considered them the more mysterious they seemed. There were first those three men in the drive, who, snaring him with that murderous wire, had, as one of them had owned, caught the wrong bird. Then there was the pistol in his host's hand; with the sudden fierceness of his demand for his caller's identity after hearing of the trouble that had overtaken him; the man's departure from the house; and again there was the fair housebreaker, who, if his ears had informed him aright, had first busied herself with his host's papers,

and then had sought to open his safe. That she was just a common thief out for plunder—money or jewels, he did not believe. But what on earth could she be wanting that she should take such risks as that indicated by the policeman whose light had shone on the window whilst she had knelt by the safe?

That he had stumbled on some mystery was indicated by these various things; but what it could be he had not the remotest idea. He considered matters for quite a long time, smoking three cigarettes whilst he did so; and finally gave up the problem in disgust.

"Possibly William or his master will explain at breakfast," he muttered; and then warned by a sudden throbbing of his head that it might be wise to seek the recuperation of sleep, he blew out the candles and laid himself down.

For a long time he lay wakeful, very aware of the odour of lavender from the wisp of silk which he had thrown on the bedside table; and recalling again and again the white face with the great dark eyes which he had glimpsed for so brief a time, finding it infinitely attractive, and intrigued by the oddness of the circumstances in which he had seen it; but at long last he fell asleep.

When next he awoke the sun was shining through the curtains, birds were singing in the garden outside; and softened by distance there was a lowing of cattle. For a brief time he lay staring drowsily round the room, dimly aware of its strangeness, but with no curiosity as to how he came to be there. He turned his head

on the pillow, and as he did so, saw the little square of coloured silk lying on the table, and caught the faint perfume of lavender it sent forth. In a second his drowsiness vanished; the events of the night flooded his brain, reconstructing themselves with marvellous distinctness; and in three seconds he was out of bed. He looked at his watch.

"Nine-twenty!" he ejaculated.

Then he remembered that his host had said something about the butler bringing morning tea to him. It might be as well to wait for the man's coming——

"My stars, no!" he broke in on his own thought. "It will be lunch-time before the fellow comes at this rate."

He wasted no time in going to the bathroom, where he found plenty of cold water but no hot, which rather surprised him.

"The elusive William is qualifying for the sack," he chuckled; and made a shift to shave himself without hot water.

Presently, dressed, and, in view of the coshing he had suffered, feeling remarkably well, he made his way downstairs. At the foot he paused and looked round. There was no one in sight, all doors, save the one leading to the library, were closed; and there was no sound of household activity—the place was silent as it had been in the dark hours. He whistled softly to himself; and then feigned a fit of coughing to attract the attention of anyone who might chance to be in any of the rooms. His effort was in vain. No one appeared, and

after another wondering glance round, he marched across the hall and, entering the library, looked round for a bell.

There was none of the modern electric type, but by the fireplace dangled a long cord of scarlet silk which he guessed must be a bell-rope. Crossing, he tugged it sharply and was rewarded by the sound of quite fierce jangling somewhere in the recesses of the house. He laughed softly.

"That ought to bring butler William," he murmured to himself.

But it did not; and after waiting a couple of minutes he tried again with the same negative result. Then with a mounting suspicion that there was no William, and that his host of the previous night had not returned, he set out to explore the house. The first door he opened was evidently the drawing-room; and that it had not been used much of late was proved by the dust-covers which robed the furniture. The next room proved to be the dining-room; and here there was evidence that someone had fed there comparatively recently; for there was a cover laid for two people; a decanter of white wine, half full; a small gammon; a fowl which had been carved but half of which remained; some undressed salad, still quite fresh; part of a loaf; and a piece of Stilton cheese. As he considered the table, it was clear to him that his missing host at some time last night had entertained another visitor, and had supped with him, though apparently the first guest had departed before his own advent.

The sight of the food reminded him that he was still breakfastless ; and feeling hungry, he was tempted to sit down and help himself. Second thoughts, however, prevailed. He would explore at least the lower part of the house before he ate ; and leaving the dining-room, he continued his pilgrimage—entering in turn a morning-room, another room where there was a handsome billiard table ; and a quite small place that from its air of untidy comfort was plainly a man's private room, probably yclept "the study."

Here there were the remains of a fire, a pair of Jaeger slippers carelessly kicked off on the hearth-rug, and, on the small table, besides a tobacco jar, an American paper ten days old—nothing to hold his attention, and he passed on once more. The next door that offered led to the kitchens, which were clean as a new pin, except for the grate in the larger one, where a fire had burned itself out ; and some cinders and ashes had fallen on the hearth.

"Well!" he ejaculated, as he looked round. "Might belong to The Deserted Village. . . . Wonder what's the meaning of it all."

He made one further shot—and in a kind of dairy came on an open window with one large pane gone, the broken glass littering the stone shelf and floor underneath.

"Here the fair burglar found a way!" he chuckled ; and then stared back. "And that's that! Not the ghost of a William, nor the shadow of his master. . . . Now for breakfast."

Returning to the dining-room, he foraged for himself a clean plate, a glass and a knife and fork ; and clearing away the used plate, seated himself at the head of the table, and, carving generous portions of the gammon and fowl, began his meal. He found himself with a ravenous appetite ; and notwithstanding his absorption in the mystery of the deserted house, he ate heartily. Then he refilled his glass, and lifted it to the light.

" One ought to thank one's host," he murmured, " but since he is so elusive—here's his very good health."

He drank half the wine, lit a cigarette, and then leaned back in the chair, considering what to do next. It seemed churlish to depart without seeing the host who had accepted his visitation so genially ; yet he had no wish to spend the morning waiting for him. There was his stolen car. He must get into touch with the police about that and learn if it had been recovered. . . . For his host ; well, one might write a note, of course, explaining——

His thought broke off sharply at a slight sound behind him, but before he could turn round to learn what had caused it, a crisp musical voice broke on his ears :

" Put your hands on the table, Mr. Perelli. Don't move them otherwise at your peril. Quick ! "

He obeyed the unseen speaker promptly and very deliberately turned his head and looked over his shoulder. Then he cried out in sheer amazement :

"Great Scot! You?"

For standing in the doorway, a levelled pistol in her hand, was the girl whose lustrous white face and dark eyes he had glimpsed so briefly whilst she had knelt in front of the safe in the small hours of the morning.

CHAPTER III

A DEAD MAN

RECOVERING quickly from his first shock of surprise, Gregory Melcombe laughed, then complained genially :

" Now, what have I done that I should be treated so ? "

" You know very well ! " the girl snapped.

Melcombe considered, then shook his head in a baffled way.

" No, you are mistaken. I am not omniscient. I cannot think of any reason unless—by Jove ! yes, that may be it. You are not by any chance mistaking me for a burglar."

" Burglar ! " The word as uttered breathed contempt.

" You sniff at the word," he laughed. " But there is solid reason for it. In the rear of the house there is a broken window plainly the deed of a member of the midnight craft." He laughed again as the girl's cheeks burned suddenly, and continued : " So you see that there exists a reason for——"

" A man does not burgle his own house," interrupted the girl curtly.

" Wrong ! " he answered. " Such a thing has been known. Scotland Yard has records

of men who stole their own goods. A curious profession when one thinks of it. But you are under a misapprehension—a double one. This house is not mine, nor do I answer to that melodious name you gave me just now."

"Not yours——" the girl began, and then checked sharply.

He saw a cloud of doubt gather in the dark eyes and smiled as he replied:

"A regrettable fact, but still the truth. . . . But, I say, do you mind coming a little forward? I've a crick in my neck, and shall acquire a permanent stiffness if I'm not careful; and I really do not want to go through life looking over my shoulder."

The girl took three paces forward. She still held the pistol ready for action, but the doubt that had been in her eyes now betrayed itself in her face—a quite charming face, as Melcombe was pleased to observe. Then she broke out hurriedly:

"If you are not Perelli—who are you?"

"Just a visitor for one night, left to breakfast alone by an elusive host and a butler who must have gone for his morning constitutional."

The girl glanced at the table, observed the used glasses, plates and cutlery which Melcombe had thrust aside, and then expressed disbelief.

"You must think I am a child——" she began.

"I assure you, no!" interrupted Melcombe. "I find you a quite charming young lady, and the situation most piquant. To tell the whole truth——"

The girl indicated the crockery with her pistol, and asserted: "Two others have breakfasted here this morning."

"No," he said lightly. "If you will consider the glass-ware and the cutlery you will see they have a certain staleness, indicating they were used at supper last night."

The girl's face betrayed a deeper perplexity; and she asked sharply: "Perelli was here, then?"

Melcombe considered a moment, and then shook his head. "Upon my word I don't know. If the owner of this house is named Perelli, then he was, but my host did not give his name; and to be quite frank, I should not have said he was an Italian as the name indicates."

He paused for the girl to speak, but she remained silent, frowning in thought as if considering some baffling thing; and he resumed. "This is a strange house. After a motor-crash which was meant for someone else——"

"Who?" broke in the girl.

"He was spoken of as 'Linky' by the men responsible for the crash—'Linky,' which, *vide* my vanished host, is momma's pet-name for Lincoln——"

"Lincoln!" the girl ejaculated. "He has been here?"

"I do not know; but I gathered that he was expected. That is all I can tell you about that. But as I was saying, this is a strange house. I am morally certain that after being welcomed and offered a night's lodging I was left alone here. But I was not solitary very long.

Another visitor showed up—a burglar—rather a novelty in that line——"

"Did you see him?" asked the girl quickly.

"It was a lady," answered Melcombe smilingly, "and believe me, I am very glad to renew her acquaintance." His smile became broader, and developed into a laugh as he shot what he thought must be a devastating question. "What on earth did you want from that safe?"

The girl did not turn a hair, nor did she attempt to deny the fact implied in his words.

"I did not know that you had seen my face," she replied calmly. "When——"

"Twice!" he laughed. "Once in a mirror when you were in the hall, and again when you were kneeling in front of the safe."

"Then you were watching all the time?"

"Well, that window was rather noisy, you know——"

"Noisy!" The girl laughed suddenly. "It sounded as if all the glass in Christendom had gone smash! . . . But we are getting no farther——"

"On the contrary, I think we are progressing well. We have established certain identities ——"

The girl swept his persiflage aside with a gesture, and asked seriously: "You are sure there is no one in the house?"

"I would wager a new hat upon it. I have searched the place thoroughly, all except one room which is locked, and there isn't so much as a cat about the place."

"That locked room——" began the girl thoughtfully and broke off.

"The key is on the door—outside," he volunteered.

"And you did not turn it? You did not look?"

Melcombe marvelled at the lack of moral principle the questions betrayed, but in excuse attributed it to a certain lack of fine scruple characteristic of feminine nature.

"You forget," he said, "I am a guest, and no Paul Pry. I may, searching for my host, look in at open doors, but not into a room that he has locked outside, where he manifestly cannot be."

"But he left the key!" said the girl quickly.

"Yes, as you say, he left the key. That might be an invitation to the curious, but I do not so construe it. He probably forgot to withdraw it."

The girl mused a moment, then she spoke slowly. "I think you ought to look in that room—in view of the strange circumstances."

Melcombe shook his head stubbornly. "No. I have my scruples. That room is my host's affair."

"But suppose he is there, locked in by someone?"

"By whom?"

"Well, there is the butler. He may have done it before going for his constitutional."

"No! The door was locked last night; and the key was there. I noticed it after your —er—retreat."

Again the girl considered and Melcombe watched her with some amusement, then she spoke crisply, and decisively.

"I am going to look."

Melcombe glanced at the pistol and shrugged his shoulders. "I cannot prevent you, and I repudiate all responsibility. But have you considered the risks? If my host or the elusive William should return——"

"That will be my affair. You will remain here——"

The speaker made a little threatening gesture with her pistol, and Melcombe laughed.

"Don't worry. I certainly shall."

The girl moved to the door, where for a moment she paused. Melcombe did not look round until the door closed, and a sharp click which proclaimed the turning of a key reached him. At that he turned quickly. The key which had been inside was no longer visible. He laughed to himself.

"Thorough! . . . But there are the windows."

He made no attempt to avail himself of them, however. He was much too interested in the extraordinary caller to leave the house at this juncture; and having a growing conviction that neither his host nor the butler was likely to put in an appearance, he was curious to learn what that locked door upstairs concealed. He lit a fresh cigarette and sat there smoking, speculating on the girl's identity and wondering what her purpose was in venturing into this house to interview its owner under duress. He

did not wonder very long, however, for suddenly the silence was broken by a cry of sheer horror, which was followed by what sounded like someone falling on the floor above him.

He wasted no time. In a second he was out of his chair and racing for the windows. The central one was of the French variety locked and bolted within. In no time at all he had it open and was racing down the terrace for the main door. He found it wide open, proof, he thought, that it had not been locked and that the girl had made her entrance that way. Without pause he raced across the hall, made for the stairs, and mounted them two at a time. Running along the gallery, he reached the door that had been locked. It now stood wide open, and within he saw the girl lying crumpled up on the carpet in a dead faint, with the pistol fallen from her hand. For a moment he stared in amazement, wondering what could have so affected a girl of such resolution and cool nerve as he judged her to be. He looked beyond her into the room; but the door limited the area of vision, and all he saw was a fine mahogany wardrobe and a chair. He moved forward quickly, stepped over the girl's legs, and then the revelation came to him.

Lying in a bed, half uncovered, with eyes staring glassily, and with a wound in his temple, and with the oxidized blood black on his cheek, was a dead man. All that Melcombe took in at the first glance, then he looked more closely. The bedclothes were thrown back as if the man had been in the act of lifting himself up when

death had surprised him. Further, one of the pillows had been tossed aside, and in the man's hand was an automatic pistol. The thought of suicide occurred to him, to be dismissed instantly. No man with a pistol in his right hand would attempt to shoot himself in the left temple. He made sure of that by stepping nearer and looking at the muzzle of the pistol. It was clean and bright and evidently the pistol had not been recently fired.

Then he looked more closely at the dead man. The face had a yellowish hue—that in life might have been olive; the eyes behind the film of death were dark; the caste of face was hawk-like; the hand that still grasped the pistol was of a neat mould, small, and plainly well-cared for. He considered a moment.

"Might be a Mexican; or a Romany, or——No, by God! Italian!"

In one dazzling flash he divined the truth. Here was the man for whom the girl had mistaken himself, the man whom she had called Perelli! He, from the fact that she had expected to find him in the house, and that here he had been a-bed plainly much at home, when the death-shot had found him, was probably the real owner of the place. But who was the man who had deputized for him, acting easily the genial host and standing hospitality to a come-by-chance stranger out of the night?

As he asked himself the question, Melcombe remembered the man's activities at the bureau, the hat and coat that had lain on the chair in the library; the way the man had gone forth

in the night, apparently without returning; and swift conviction provided the answer.

"The murderer!"

He had never a doubt of it as he stood there staring into that dead face. The man who had succoured himself, laid out the pyjamas for him, indicated the bathroom and had convoyed him to his bedroom, was almost certainly the one guilty of this crime. Why had he done all that—knowing of this dead man? The possible explanation leaped to his mind instantly. If he himself had been found in this house of tragedy, he would almost certainly have been detained, possibly charged with the crime, whilst the man responsible made an untrammelled escape. That was it, and——

The sound of a sigh and a slight movement broke on his speculations. The girl was reviving, and it was as well that she should not look on that still figure in the bed any more. He turned to her swiftly. Save for a little fluttering of the eyelids, she was quite still again, and in a moment he had stooped, lifted her, and carried her from the room. He paused on the gallery to close and lock the door behind him, then with the still unconscious girl slung over his shoulder like a sack, he went downstairs to the library, remembering the brandy that had been there.

He set the girl in the chair he himself had occupied on the previous night, and going to the bureau poured some of the brandy from the bottle into one of the used glasses, since it was no time for minor considerations. As he turned

to the girl, he saw the violet eyes open, look forth dazedly, and then quicken with dreadful remembrance. At that he changed his mind, ran back to the bureau, splashed the brandy with soda-water, and hurried back.

"Don't speak," he said. "Drink! All of it! Quickly! There is need for haste."

The girl took the tumbler with a shaking hand, and Melcombe heard the glass rattle against her teeth whilst she drank. Then when it was empty he took it from her and set it on the table. As he did so the girl spoke shiveringly.

"Y-you . . . know? . . . You s-saw?"

"Yes."

"W-who is he?"

"Don't know for a certainty. Guessing, I should say that it was the man you mistook me for—Perelli, and the real owner of this house. He looks like an Italian, anyway. But he is not our affair, and the best thing that we can do is to get away from this house just as quickly as we can; unless we wish to be involved in a first-class murder mystery. Myself, I don't want to see my name blazoned in every newspaper in England; and I don't suppose that you——"

"Oh, no, no!" cried the girl half frantically.

"Then we must get away without being seen, if possible; we are innocent, and know little enough about the affair. I can communicate what information I have to the police anonymously. But for the moment the thing is to get clear."

"I—I have a car at the gates."

"Good. But I hope to heaven no one notices the number. If you feel able, I think you had better go first. Drive down the road going west, and wait for me. It will be better that we should not be seen leaving here together."

The girl rose from the chair a little unsteadily, then her hand went to the pocket, and a troubled look came on her face.

"What is it?" he asked quickly.

"My pistol!" she answered. "I must have d-dropped it s-somewhere!"

"By Jove, yes! I know where it is. I saw it. I will retrieve it. Off you go. But wait for me. You owe me that much."

The girl drew herself up and spoke a little sharply.

"You need not remind me. I am not a—a cad . . . I shall wait."

"I am sure you will," he answered apologetically, and moved with her out of the library across the hall to the outer door. Then he gave her swift counsel. "Don't hurry. Look as natural as you can. If you meet anyone, take no notice. Keep straight on. I will be with you in a very few minutes."

He watched her go down the drive, saw that she carried herself firmly, and then hurried back into the house. First he retrieved her pistol, and re-locking the door of that dead man's room, he went downstairs to look for the telephone with the intention of informing the police of the tragedy that had occurred. But look

where he would he could not find the instrument, and finally, with a suspicion of the truth, went out of doors and looked up at the corners of the house and the chimney-stack for any wire. He saw none. The house, then, was not on the telephone service.

"And that rascal knew it," he reflected. "That was why he wanted to save me the trouble by telephoning himself. He knew that I should insist upon finding a telephone somewhere, and was afraid that it might bring the police this way. Confound the fellow. . . . Means there's going to be trouble about the Alvis, I'm afraid."

He re-entered the house, took a swift look round to be sure that neither the girl nor he had left anything compromising about, and was on the point of leaving when his eyes fell on the grey overcoat hanging in the hall, which he had almost forgotten.

"Phew!" he whistled. "One of the stupid mistakes that criminals make."

Throwing the coat over his arm, he left the house, closing the door behind him. As he went down the drive he kept a sharp look out for his hat, but failed to see anything of it. Then he suffered a little shock. Just as he glimpsed the gate, which was closed, he heard the sound of wheels, and saw a milk-float pull up outside. He wasted no time. Without hesitation he slipped into the shrubbery, and confident that the milkman had not seen him, he hurried on, making a devious way through the bushes until he came to a stone wall which

bounded the property. On the farther side there was a field of young wheat, and climbing the wall he dropped down, making a bee-line towards a hedge which as he guessed ran parallel with the road. The hedge was banked and too high to see over, and twice as he followed it he climbed it to look at the road, without, however, seeing the car he sought. But a minute or two later he saw it standing at a point where the road turned, and after making sure that there was no one about, he dropped over the hedge and made for the car.

As she saw him a look of relief came on the girl's face.

" Oh ! " she cried in a low voice. " I thought you were never coming. . . . I was growing afraid. Jump in ! "

" I was delayed," he answered, as he took the seat by her side. " A man was bringing the morning milk and I had to dodge into the shrubbery, not wanting to see him face to face."

Without delay the girl started the car, changed gears, accelerated ; and the car began to pick up speed at an amazing rate. It picked up to a point which made Melcombe nervous. He did not mind doing forty-five or fifty on the highroad, but, like many drivers when someone else was at the wheel, he was nervous of the risks that were taken. He looked at the speedometer needle. It was over the fifty mark, and though the road was empty ahead there was a point where it ceased to be visible, and where he knew there must be a curve.

Then he glanced at the girl. The white face had a set look; the violet eyes were staring straight ahead; and while she betrayed nothing of it, he suspected that she had fear for spur. He looked again at the needle. It was creeping up. Then a car came in sight suddenly moving towards them. The girl drew a little to the side, scarcely slackened, and they swept by the other car at a speed and with a margin so narrow that Melcombe was moved to protest.

"I say, we are not at Brooklands."

"I know! I wish we were. . . . Where do you want to get?"

"Well, not to the mortuary we seem to be making for. Being on holiday, I value my young life."

The girl took the hint, slowed a little, and then spoke quickly.

"I . . . I am afraid."

"Well," answered Melcombe, "the greater the speed the bigger the smash. After all, you know, we don't want to draw attention to ourselves, as we shall if we go breaking records, and if we break anything else——"

They swept round the curve that he had seen, saw a cross-roads ahead, and two policemen standing there, with a car held up. The car moved on whilst they approached the corner, and one of the policemen held up his hand signalling them to stop. The girl gave a gasp.

"Dear God," she whispered. "If . . . if ——"

He understood her fear and spoke reassuringly.

"It can't be what you are thinking. These

men can know nothing of that dead man in the bed. Keep your nerve. It is either a trap or an examination of licences."

The girl gave a little laugh of relief. "Of course. I never thought of that. I was thinking only of one thing."

When she pulled up, her self-possession was perfect. The constables, it appeared, were inspecting insurance certificates and drivers' licences, and the girl had both with her. She thrust them past Melcombe to the constable's hand, and the officer, having examined them, in returning them clumsily dropped them. Melcombe stooped to retrieve them, and as he did so almost involuntarily read the name on the licence which had fallen open. He closed it as he picked it up and handed both to her, and as they moved forward silently registered the name in his mind. Miss Madeline Westley!

Presently a yellow and black sign on a telegraph pole flashed into view. "A.A. Telephone 1 mile."

"I want you to stop at the telephone-box," he said. "I must telephone."

"But I have no key. I am not a member."

"I am," he answered with a laugh. "And I have a car somewhere, though it was stolen last night."

"Stolen?"

"Yes, from that house. The gentleman who acted as my host promised to telephone about the matter to the police; but as I discovered just now there is no wire leading to the house, I imagine he did not keep his promise. Also,

there is the matter of that dead man. I think the police must be informed."

"Yes-s!" said Miss Westley, a little doubtfully.

"For our own sakes," he insisted. "The English police are not the fools some people imagine. If they learn that we have been in that house, and have neglected to report what has happened, it might be very troublesome for both of us. . . . But I shall not telephone both items from the same box. That would never do. They would connect the two like a shot. . . . First I shall telephone the news of the murder, and from some place farther on make inquiries about the car. Ah, there's the box . . . I say, do you remember the name of that house?"

"Dartleigh House."

"Thank you. . . . If you don't mind pulling up."

The girl pulled up, and unlocking the box, Melcombe proceeded to ring up the police at the nearest town, giving information that would take them to that house of tragedy.

"Eh, what? Murder, did you say?" answered the voice at the other end. "Who is giving the information?"

"That is private. The person had nothing to do with the crime and discovered it by accident. He does not want to be drawn into publicity."

"But you must——"

Melcombe did not think so. Very deliberately he hung up the instrument, and locked the box.

"Now," he said as he re-entered the car, "I

think you must take the first turn off this road. The police will already be tracing the call; and when they learn it is from an A.A. box this side of Dartleigh House they will no doubt stop every car on the road. It will be well to avoid trouble."

The girl made no demur. Obediently she took the next turn, a rather narrow road with no traffic to speak of, winding like the course of a sluggish river in flat country. As they followed it, he ventured to ask a question.

"Where are you going to when you are rid of me?"

"London!" answered the girl briefly.

"I wonder if I might have your address?"

"Is that necessary?"

"It might be desirable that I should be able to communicate with you in certain eventualities, Miss Westley."

He saw her start, and then she asked quickly: "You know my name?"

"By accident. I saw it on your driving licence when it was dropped. Believe me, I was not prying."

"You read the address, perhaps?"

"No."

The girl pondered a little while, then she said: "If necessary you might write c/o Madame Marie et Cie, Marlowe Street, West Kensington."

Melcombe wrote the name and address in his pocket-book, then took out a card and put it in the leather pocket on the door.

"My address is there. If you should wish to communicate——"

Acc No 39

"I hope it won't be necessary," said the girl quietly. "But if it is you will hear from me. . . . We seem to be coming to a village."

"Yes."

A turn of the lane brought them in sight of a straggling street; then Melcombe gave an ejaculation of amazement.

"By Jupiter! . . . The Alvis!"

"What——"

"My stolen car," he cried excitedly. "There it is; outside that inn. Pull up, please."

An odd look, partly of disinclination, partly apprehension, came on Miss Westley's face.

"If the men who stole it are there, I . . . I do not want to meet them."

"No reason why you should, Miss Westley. Just drop me and drive on. I'll tackle them."

The girl pulled up, and Melcombe descended. Then he said: "I hope we shall meet again, soon, Miss Westley."

Miss Westley laughed. "I am not sure that I do. . . . It might mean trouble for both of us. . . . But I should like to know what happens when you claim your car."

"You shall!" He laughed cheerfully. "I will write you a full account of the adventure."

"Thank you! . . . Don't forget your coat. . . . Good morning."

"Good morning, Miss Westley."

The girl waved her hand, and the car moved on. Melcombe watched it disappear at the far end of the street, and then addressed the wide, wide world.

"Good morning! There's coolness for you!

. . . Well——" He made a gesture that indicated the unutterable, and then, aware that he was under observation from the tap-room window of the inn, he strode towards the house with his heart kindling for battle.

Entering the inn, he swung into the tap-room, where a burly man who had been staring over the red curtains turned slowly to meet him. Guessing the man to be the landlord, Melcombe addressed him sharply.

" Where are the men who came in that car outside ? "

" Lor' knows ! " answered the man slowly. " I habbent put eyes on 'em."

" You mean they're gone ? "

" Noa, I don't. I just mean I habbent seen 'em. That car was there where ee see it, at half-past zix this mornin', lights on though the sun be well up ; an' not a soul in sight to claim her."

Abandoned, thought Melcombe silently, and then found occasion for rejoicing in the fact ; since now he would not have to go to the police.

" The car is mine," he said aloud.

" Know'd her was somebody's. . . . Been in the wars zeemingly."

" Yes ; she was stolen last night."

" Ee don't zay ! . . . Jimmy, zome folks ud steal a church. . . . An' her'm yours, hey ? Well, ee be welcome to her. For my part I can't abide the contraptions. Hoss-flesh vor me, every time ; nature an' Providence before the works ov the devil ! "

Melcombe laughed. " Every man to his

taste. I like a horse myself over the stubble and the turnips. . . . But you'd better take a look at this and compare it with the car number, and you will see that I really am the owner."

He produced the insurance certificate required by the Road Traffic Act, and held it out for the other's inspection. The man waved it away.

" Don't matter a button to me. . . . I've no responsibility. . . . 'Sides, I've a lost my specs."

Melcombe laughed. It seemed he was to have no difficulty in claiming his own, and going outside he made an inspection of the car. As he had more than half expected, the tank was empty, which was no doubt the reason why the thieves had abandoned her. The rear number-plate was missing, and one of the wings crumpled, and with the damaged wind-screen represented the total damage.

" Nothing vital ! " he commented. " A piece of board with a chalked number, and some petrol, and I am ready for the road."

The chalk and the board were forthcoming ; but it was not for three-quarters of an hour that the saving petrol arrived, with a rural baker's van that carried a spare tin. He had no difficulty in bargaining for it, and in five minutes he was ready to start. Slipping on the coat, he discovered that whilst the same in colour it was not his own, fitting him too loosely, and conjectured that his host of last night must have taken the wrong one by mistake.

No matter. Exchange was no robbery, and a

coat was a coat. Opening the car, he found his lost trilby on the mat, much trodden on, and flat as a pancake. He straightened it out, brushed it with his sleeve, and put it on. Then he tipped the indifferent landlord, and started on his way, making for the London Road. At a garage in Exeter he secured a new number-plate, had the wing straightened out, and the broken wind-screen temporarily patched with double sheets of talc. Whilst these repairs were being executed, he sought a post office, and telegraphed to the caretaker of his chambers to expect him before midnight ; and a little while after resumed his way, Londonwards.

Big Ben was striking ten when, having delivered the Alvis at his garage with instructions to execute all repairs immediately, he arrived at his chambers. The caretaker met him in the hall.

"Gentleman waiting to see you, sir."

"To see me!" Melcombe was surprised. "Who is he?"

"Don't know! He's been here two hours. I put him in the empty suite."

"Um! Well! Show him up. I will see him at once."

"Very good, sir."

Melcombe took the lift to his chambers, entered, switched on the light, and was in the act of mixing himself a whisky-and-soda when a knock at the door proclaimed his visitor.

"Come in," he said.

The door opened ; and over his shoulder Melcombe caught sight of a face he knew.

"Teddy Hamilton!" he ejaculated. "By all that's wonderful. I thought you were in the States——"

"Came back three days ago, business having returned across the Atlantic, and now it seems to have centred here at Hatfield Mansions."

"Here? What the deuce do you mean?"

"Well! What's the number of your car, old boy?"

"Number!" echoed Melcombe blankly; and in the same moment realized that before him was a bumpy road.

Then quite coolly he indicated the tantalus and the syphon.

"Help yourself, Teddy, and then unfold the reason for this sudden interest in my car-number."

CHAPTER IV

A SURPRISE MEETING

THE caller mixed himself a whisky-and-soda, and in the brief respite afforded, Melcombe prepared himself for the questionnaire which he divined was coming. Hamilton took a chair, lifted his glass, drank, then considered the other with amused eyes.

"It's an old game to counter," he laughed, "but my question comes first, Gregory. The number of your car is——"

"YA 1236."

"Correct!" Hamilton laughed again. Then casually jerked his next question. "Lost a rear number-plate lately?"

Melcombe saw where he was leading, and perceived the uselessness of any effort to turn aside, yet made the effort with a half-truth.

"Last night, somewhere in Devonshire. My car was stolen, and when I found it this morning the number-plate was gone."

"Um!" Hamilton considered the information for a moment, and as he did so frowned slightly. Then he smiled. "Report the matter to the police?"

"Good Lord, no! I got a new one in Exeter."

Hamilton laughed. "I wasn't referring to the number-plate. Question referred to the car. Did you report the theft?"

Melcombe shook his head. "Not personally. I had just had a little accident and was considerably shaken. Another man undertook to telephone the loss, but I suspect that he did nothing of the sort."

"Why?"

"Well, this morning I discovered he wasn't on the telephone. His offer, I imagine, was just soothing syrup."

"And this morning when you found that out?"

"Meant to report, of course; but found the car—abandoned, so didn't bother. I'm on holiday and don't want to waste time messing with the police."

Hamilton nodded understanding. "They do waste one's time." He looked out of the window, then shot his next question. "Member of the A.A., aren't you?"

"Yes; R.A.C. too."

"Prudence is justified of her children." Hamilton laughed as he delivered the platitude. "You have a key, of course, to the A.A. telephone-boxes?"

"Naturally," replied Melcombe. "But so far as I can remember, I have only once had occasion to use it."

"This morning?"

"Yes!"

"Then it *was* you who reported the murder at Dartleigh House?"

Melcombe nodded. "How did you find out?"

"Call was easily traced, of course, and even the rural constabulary have brains. The call-box had not been broken open; natural inference was the caller had a key, key implied membership of the A.A.——"

"There are thousands of A.A. members!" interjected Melcombe.

Hamilton nodded. "True. They're on the roads thick as autumn leaves, but only one of them left his number-plate in the grounds of Dartleigh House, last night."

"Um! It was found there?"

"Yes!" Hamilton laughed. "Might as well have nailed your visiting-card to the front door. When the county police found that it took but little time to discover the owner, and not much more to find the owner was a member of the A.A. and would be privileged to hold a telephone key. Further inquiries revealed that the said holder of the key was a worthy member of society not likely to go murdering people in their beds."

"For this unsolicited testimonial——"

"So, as I was interested in the dead Italian ——"

"Ah! It was Perelli, then?"

"Yes! Perelli. Though what the devil you have to do with him, Gregory, leaves me guessing."

"And when you know will still leave you guessing. I know nothing about the fellow except that I saw him lying shot in his bed this morning."

"You think the police will swallow that?"

"If you tell them to, yes," Melcombe laughed. "You said you were interested in the dead Perelli. That means, I suppose, that he comes into the ambit of your department?"

"Yes. Just come back from the U.S.A. with a friend who also is interested in Perelli, and who has gone down to Devonshire to identify the corpse. . . . Just to make sure, you understand; for Perelli has been rather an elusive bird." Hamilton paused to light a cigarette, then he looked at his friend, and inquired casually: "Going to deliver the round unvarnished tale, Gregory, or do I third degree you?"

"Oh, I'll tell you the story. You'll find it entertaining, I fancy."

He gave a vivid account of his adventures of the previous night, omitting, however, any reference to the lady burglar, and Hamilton listened without interruption to the end, when he mused for a little time in silence and then aloud.

"Wonder who the wire-operators were?"

"Don't know! But they weren't after me. Linky was the bird they meant to snare."

"And Linky was the fellow in the house, of course—your genial host."

"I have that idea."

"Got a description of him?"

"More or less. He was tall, broad but lean, bony-faced, black eyes, thick eyebrows, with two gold-filled teeth in front, had a slight

American accent, and used occasional U.S.A. idioms."

"Good enough. Railton—my chum who has gone to view the corpse—should recognize him, though I don't."

He broke off, stared vacantly round the room, then his eyes came back to Melcombe in a way that promptly set the latter on his guard.

"Hear any window-smashing in the night?"

"Well, now you mention it, I did hear a sound of breaking glass," he answered slowly.

"Didn't see anything of a lady, I suppose?"

"Lady?" Melcombe's tone of surprise was perfect, and he said brazenly: "No! I told you that fellow who played host referred to no one but the butler whom I never saw."

"Good reason. Butler wasn't there, I'll wager; but the lady was, I'll bet on that too."

"But how on earth——"

"Report describes heel-marks, lady's, outside a smashed window. Print of a gloved hand, lady's size, on the window, and on a safe in the library, finger-prints; small, lady's size again, so it's certain there was a lady at Dartleigh last night. May have been with your host or working independent. Furthermore, a lady, young, attractive, was seen to leave a car at the gates and go in—this morning."

Melcombe felt that the hunt was getting too warm for comfort; but kept a composed face, and his voice was under perfect control as he replied:

"Might be before I was up, or after I had left. Did they get the number of the car?"

"No. There was at the time no reason why anyone should notice it particularly."

"A pity."

"You think so? Well, one never knows what may turn up. By the by, it was a goodish step from Dartleigh to the telephone-box you used."

"Farther than I liked," agreed Melcombe feelingly, and waited with a little anxiety for the next question.

"Pass anybody on the road?"

"Yes; let me see—a man with a milk-float, a car or two; and a couple of constables at a cross-roads examining motor licences by the look of things."

For a moment there was a flicker of doubt in Hamilton's eyes, then he said tentatively: "You didn't think of reporting to them?"

"Last thing I dreamed of. I didn't want to be involved in the affair. That's why I used the telephone-box. Of course, if I had known of that number-plate——"

"Of course!"

Hamilton grinned cheerfully, and his eyes went round the room again and finally rested on Melcombe's rather battered hat, which, on entering his chambers, the owner had dropped on a chair. He considered the hat for quite a long time without speaking. Melcombe, watching him, remembered that he had been hatless when Madeline Westley's car had been held up by the police. Was he thinking of that

incident, wondering if it were possible that he was not hearing the truth? He appeared to have heard so much in so short a time, that it was likely he knew of the pair who had passed along the road about the time the telephone message had been sent. But so long as he did not connect up, it did not matter. He waited, outwardly nonchalant, but secretly much on the alert until his friend spoke again.

"I'd give a shilling to know the name of the lady who tackled the safe. She was certainly no friend of the dead Perelli—who was a confirmed misogynist."

"Is that so?" Melcombe's manner rather than his words betrayed his interest. "You seem to know quite a lot about him, Teddy. Who and what was he?"

Melcombe's interest was just as keen as it appeared to be, for he was thinking that knowledge of the dead man might give him a clue to the reason for Madeline Westley's nocturnal adventure.

"Departmental secret at present. . . . But I can tell you this much, Perelli has been at Dartleigh House for the last eighteen months or so. Bought the whole estate, lock, stock and barrel, furniture and books, from the executors of the late owner, and has lived there like a mite in a cheese, with a man to do for him——"

"Then there was a William after all?" ejaculated Melcombe.

Teddy Hamilton laughed. "Fellow called himself Niccolo, which isn't the same thing."

"My host mustn't have known then! . . . But where is Niccolo?"

"Vanished! I want to find him badly; and Railton wants him even worse. He is as keen there as I am about that girl."

Melcombe was well aware of the inquiring flash of his friend's eyes as he thus harked back; but he had been expecting something of the sort, and betrayed himself by not so much as the wink of an eyelid.

"Then you have a problem apiece," he laughed.

"Yes." Teddy Hamilton laughed with him; then asked another question in the most casual way. "By the by, where did you find your abandoned car?"

"Don't know the name of the place—too small to deserve one, I should say. But it had a public-house with the most unconcerned landlord I ever met. Fellows who stole the Alvis, having run out of petrol, had parked it outside his inn some time in the small hours. He saw it there at half-past six, and viewed it with a massive indifference.

"The inn would have a name?"

"If it had I never saw or heard it."

"So!" Then Teddy Hamilton laughed. "You're a helpful sort of bird, Gregory. No observation whatever—when it suits you to be blind!" He rose from his chair. "Well, I'll be going. Have an engagement with Railton in twenty minutes—at the end of a telephone wire." He made a move towards the door, reached it, and with his hand on the knob

looked round. "If I didn't know you so well, I'd have you run in." He laughed again, and waved a warning finger. "Have a care—have a care! Knight-errantry is a form of lunacy that has brought many a stout fellow to the altar—— But if you want my help——"

"As best man?" chuckled Melcombe.

"I wasn't thinking of that," owned the other. "You have a novitiate to pass before you qualify, I suspect. . . . But if trouble lifts its head——"

He broke off, and Gregory Melcombe nodded, understanding. "I won't forget."

Hamilton passed outside, closing the door behind him; and when his steps passed out of hearing, Melcombe whistled thoughtfully, and asked aloud:

"Now, just how much does Teddy know?"

He considered that question for some time, for Inspector Hamilton, who was a special branch man at the C.I.D., was no fool; as all his friends were well aware. Behind his questioning there had been more than he had revealed. Of that Melcombe was assured; and he found himself wondering if his friend already knew the identity of the girl who had left heel-tracks and finger-prints at Dartleigh House. In that case——

He broke off his reflections and glanced at the clock. Then he took out his pocket-book and considered the address the girl had given him. Perhaps it would be wise to warn her that she was being sought for. . . . Knight-errantry? He laughed as he recalled Teddy

Hamilton's word. Well, at any rate, it would be only decent to let her know, for Madeline Westley, he was sure, was no lady crook, notwithstanding her reprehensible activities of last night. If he scrawled a note, he could post it, and it would be delivered by morning.

He wrote the note without delay; and then remembering that he had neither dined nor supped, after a glance at his watch, quickly changed into evening kit. Twenty minutes later, having posted the letter, he hailed a taxi, and in a little time was deposited outside the Medici—the popular supper-restaurant of the day, the liveliness of which was belied by its quiet and discreet exterior. It was almost full; but he was known there, and the friendly head-waiter conducted him to a table which displayed a reserved card.

"The usual fiction, Luigo," he laughed.

"For our regular patrons," answered Luigo, with only the slightest Italian accent. Then he looked at the clock. "The wine, sir. It would be well to order that at once. The regulations are so stupid."

"The exact word!" Melcombe laughed, considered the wine list the man offered, gave his order, and presently, whilst sipping a cocktail, surveyed the softly lit room, his eyes roving from table to table in search of any acquaintance. For a time he found none, and was well on his way with his supper before he beheld the face of a friend—Lord "Bobby" Medway, heir to half a county, who was supposed to divide his time between devilling for

a leading politician and nursing a constituency which his uncle was shortly to vacate. The truth was that Bobby seldom remembered either of the two occupations, finding the shining hours too precious to be so wasted, but improving the last assiduously in his own care-free way. Apparently he was so engaged at the moment, as Melcombe noted with a smile. For the Medici is renowned for its syncopated music, and with others Bobby was absorbed in a series of elaborate shuffles and jerky steps which surely had their genesis in the cotton-fields of South Carolina.

Melcombe looked at Bobby's partner, a girl who was a stranger to him, but who certainly had her qualities. She danced perfectly. Her flaming dress became her dark beauty; her hair was like night; her lips vivid as a poppy; her eyes were blue, put in, as the Irish saying goes, with a smutty finger. There was nothing of the languishing miss about her, and, watching, Melcombe had a notion that she was well able to look after herself, and might indeed have claws. Was she alone with Bobby or——

His half-shaped question was answered almost immediately. The band made an abrupt finish, and the pair turned together and walked to the next table but one where two men were seated. As they came forward Bobby caught Melcombe's eye, and grinned suddenly; then, having squired the lady to her seat, came forward to greet his friend.

"Well, Powder," he said, giving Melcombe

an old schoolboy sobriquet, "looking for the rosebuds before they're withered?"

"No," laughed Melcombe, "just feeding."

"Gross creature!" jibed the other. "You'll grow obese if you're not careful."

Melcombe ignored the jibe, and looked at the vivid lady who had been Bobby's partner.

"Who is the lady, Bobby?"

Lord Bobby laughed. "Search me, as the lady herself would say in her native idiom. I believe her name is Sadie. All misses from the U.S.A. are that or Edna, and I'm sure it's not the last."

"She's a stranger then——"

"No! No! Man, I picked up a handkerchief she dropped——"

"But I say, Sadie——" A man's voice protesting strong and with a faint hint of the raw accent of the States reached the two young men from the table where the three were, and Bobby grinned triumphantly.

"What did I tell you? Sadie is her name, America her nation, and—— Lord, what's nipped you, Powder?"

"S-s-s-h-h! Don't make a scene, Bobby. I've just recognized the voice of a friend, whose name I don't know. Those two men with the girl? Do you know them better than you know Sadie?"

"Not so well! Didn't pick up their handkerchiefs, you know. But truth will out. I don't think any more of you for cherishing such friendship. Which of the beauties has your affection?"

"Don't know," answered Melcombe tersely. "But one of them laid me out last night, or that voice lies."

"Phew! You never say? I shouldn't have said either of them were bruisers, though I'll back my fancy that both of them are well-tailored ruffians."

"They don't use fists. A pound or so of duck-shot in a canvas sling was the instrument of my undoing."

"Great Caesar! They're of the Limehouse tribe?"

"No; Cicero, Chicago, I should say, which is worse. . . . I say, Bobby, you must introduce me."

"But, you ass, they're persons unknown——"

"There is the lady. I might dance——" began Melcombe.

Lord Bobby rose from his chair. "You've said it!"

He led the way to the other table. The two men stared at him coldly, but the girl beamed, and he made the introduction with gay aplomb.

"Meet a friend of mine, Miss Sadie, dying to try the parquet here, if you will honour him—— Mr. Gregory Melcombe."

A glass crashed suddenly, and Melcombe saw a flash of consternation in the eyes of the men who had caught his name; then one of them began diligently to mop up the spilled wine, whilst the face of the other became mask-like. A waiter hurried forward, and as the band struck up the girl laughed a little stridently.

"If you dance as well as your friend, Mr. Gregory——"

Melcombe, quite sure that his ears had not misled him, led the sparkling lady to the floor, and as they danced from time to time saw the two men watching him with perturbed eyes whilst they talked earnestly to each other. That they had recognized him he had no doubt, and he was gratified as he thought how they must be fluttered. Then his partner's voice made itself heard.

"Say, you ain't an undertaker's mute, are you?"

"Not yet," he laughed. "But one never knows his luck."

"Then talk. The sleeping-partner business gives me a chill. Who's your handsome boy-friend?"

"Lord Bobby Medway," answered Melcombe, reckless of any hole he might be digging for his friend.

"Lord! Not a real, live, gilt-edged——"

"Gilt-edged, hall-marked, pre-war, twenty under proof, branded-on-the-cork—the real thing!" laughed Melcombe.

"My, and I never cottoned to it. Say, are all lords like him?"

"No! Some are better and some are gouty. Bobby's the average gilded youth."

"And yourself, Mr.—— Oh, I can't get it——"

"Melcombe! — Gregory Melcombe!" he prompted, and watching, for any possible reaction, had his reward.

"Melcombe!" said the lady a clouded look in her eyes. "I've heard that name somewhere——"

She broke off sharply. Comprehension flashed in the clouded eyes, he felt her stiffen in his arms, and knew that, like the man who had let the wine-glass crash, she had made the mental association he had expected. But before he could speak there was another lightning change. A look of startled amazement came on her face, and in the blue eyes that were looking over his shoulder leaped a new light of recognition. She missed a step, made a false one, and as she halted sharply, another couple bumped them. Melcombe turned to apologize, and as he did so the lady slipped from his arms and made a bee-line to the table where her friends were. Melcombe moved out of the way of the dancers, and looked round for the cause of Miss Sadie's amazement. And as he did so he himself suffered a little shock; for standing in the doorway with Luigo, obviously seeking a table, was the man who last night at Dartleigh House had played the Samaritan host.

CHAPTER V

LINCOLN O'HARA

FOR a space of some seconds Gregory Melcombe was too amazed to do anything but stare. With the tail of his eye he saw his late partner speak to the two men at the table, and beheld the one with his back to the door turn swiftly. An explosive ejaculation followed.

"Linky, by God!"

Luigo was indicating a table to the newcomer. It was at the farther side of the room; and whilst he watched the man nodded and began to follow the head-waiter. Hoping to learn something more before he himself took a hand, Melcombe edged a little nearer the table where Sadie stood with the two men. But whilst the latter were manifestly excited, their heads were together and they spoke in low tones. He could hear nothing, and though he tried to catch the girl's eyes, she kept them resolutely averted. Lord Bobby signalled to him, and since for the moment he had no wish to attract the new arrival's attention, he returned to his own table, where his friend, having caught a waiter, was ordering Kummel for both of them.

"Well, Powder," he asked cheerfully, "what

happened? You were left on the floor. Did you tread on Sadie's corns?"

"No! Someone came into the restaurant whom she knew. It was a shock to her and——"

"The neglected husband, I'll bet. These American women treat their men-folk worse than cattle—look on them as mere machines for turning out dollars."

"I don't think he's the lady's husband. You see, Bobby, I happen to have met him."

"The deuce you have! And Sadie is interested in him. The plot deepens. If one only knew what it was. But I always say that if you wait long enough at the Medici you will meet everyone whom you knew in your disreputable past. . . . Who and where is the guy?"

"That fellow whom Luigo is attending to across the room."

Lord Bobby turned and stared at the man deliberately.

"Regular Death's-Head—but for the eyes," he commented. "Skull without the cross-bones. A hard case, I'll bet."

"Armour-plated! I suspect him of killing a man last night."

"Phew! The Lyceum's nothing on you, when you get going. We sup with villains to right and left of us; and since birds of a feather—— But I say, old man, are you serious?"

"Quite. That man left a house in the dead of night after impersonating the owner. The latter was found shot in his bed."

"Ah! The Dartleigh House business. I read about that in the evening paper. Mean to say you were in that mess?"

"I slept next door to the dead man, and —er—found him—this morning——"

"My hat! You do go the pace. . . . And you think that fellow over there is Cain's understudy?"

"I have that idea."

"Um! Plain duty to walk out and commandeer the nearest copper. What are you going to do about it, Powder?"

"Make sure, by interviewing the man. I have not thanked him for his vicarious hospitality."

"You'll spoil his supper." Lord Bobby laughed, and after a glance at the neighbouring table, added: "But that doesn't matter. Looks as if Sadie and her cavaliers might do something of that sort, as well."

Melcombe looked at the trio. All of them were watching the unconscious Linky, and from the tense look on their faces it certainly seemed as if they might be moved to drastic action.

"I'll get in first, Bobby. . . . Wait here for me, and keep your eyes open."

Walking straight across the restaurant to the table where his quondam host was seated, he drew out the opposite chair, sat down and gave him greeting.

"Good evening, Mr. Linky."

The man who had been studying a menu card looked up. His bony face was blank as a whitewashed wall; his black eyes as they

fastened themselves on Melcombe were without even a flicker of recognition. For a moment he stared blankly, then he replied drawlingly:

"Say, stranger, you're sure making a bad mistake. I ain't no Mr. Linky, nor even his near relation."

Melcombe ignored the denial. "'Momma's pet-name for Lincoln,' you said last night, and you ought to know."

"Sure! And where did I say the d——d thing, I'd like to know?"

"In Devon at——"

"Never been in Devon in all my little life. Mean to go there, though, before I'm through the trip." The man's manner was perfect; his coolness in view of what he must know was remarkable; his voice that of one who was amused at another's mistake; and without giving Melcombe an opportunity to intervene, he went on. "One of the show-places over here, they tell me. Home of Franky Drake; an' the last land the Pilgrim Fathers touched before they stepped out on Plymouth Rock. A great moment that, sir, for one who is of Pilgrim stock——"

"Haven't a doubt of it, Mr. Lincoln! . . . But what about Perelli?"

The man looked at him indulgently. "Is it a catch?" he asked. "It's a new one to me."

"It may be a hanging as well as a catch," answered Melcombe shortly.

"A double event!" the other commented with perfect self-possession.

"Did you shoot him?"

"Did I——" There was amazement in the man's face, which suddenly gave way to indignation. "Hell!" he ejaculated. "What are you getting at?" Then the flame of wrath died from his eyes and he laughed suddenly.

"You'd better hop along home, sonny boy, quick. You ain't cut your wisdom teeth on liquor yet, I guess, an' you've looked on the red wine too earnestly for one in his first long pants. If you've been seeing dead corpses you'll be seeing live snakes next; an' you'll find 'em durned hard to catch among this clutter of tables an' chair legs, so I'd quit if I were you, boy, before the Zoo gets loose."

His manner was that of one indulgent to the follies of youth. His face was a mask of good temper, his eyes betrayed no watchful anxiety, and Melcombe might have been convinced that he was merely making a fool of himself, but for two things. As he spoke the man laughed, revealing two gold fillings in his front teeth; and in the same second Melcombe remembered that others besides himself had identified the man.

"You're a good actor, Mr. Linky," he retorted cheerfully. "But it won't do. Just cast your eyes across the room—to that table near the palms, there—the one where Miss Sadie sits with two men . . . you see them? They are watching you."

Unquestionably the man saw, for there was a lightning change in his demeanour. His face set in grim lines. His cavernous brows lowered,

and there was a raging flame in his dark eyes. When he spoke his voice was like a rasp.

"So! . . . you're pals. Might have sensed it last night. . . . You got them damned documents, I guess. . . . I'll come down handsomely for them, twenty-thousand dollars paid on the nail, an' that's a heap more than Piero will hand out. Might fix for a rake-off too! . . . Is it a deal? . . . I've got to quit this chop-house, sharp."

Melcombe remembered the man's search among the papers in the bureau, and Madeline Westley's attempt upon the safe. Here he thought was an opportunity to learn something more of the mystery on which he had stumbled.

"Papers!" he said with the air of a man who, having knowledge, chose to affect ignorance. "If I knew what papers you refer to——"

The man broke in on him savagely. "Stow that eye-wash. You know. I took the wrong coat——" He checked suddenly and shot a keen look at Melcombe. Then the man laughed harshly. "By Gee! . . . I got it!"

That some startling idea had flared in his mind was evident. A light of exultation leaped in his dark eyes. Then he rose abruptly from his chair. He glanced sideways at the two men and the girl at the other table. They were watching him closely as a cat watches a mouse, and Melcombe, also aware of their interest, would have wagered his head that if Linky left the restaurant the others would be at his heels. He himself was wondering what to do. The man meant to go; and short of

tackling him, or sending for a policeman, and charging the man with murder, he could see no way of stopping him. But whilst morally certain that the fellow was the slayer of the man in that bedroom at Dartleigh, he had no shadow of proof. And that was but one end of the problem. The other end lay in the man's swift change of manner. What idea had come to him to bring that exulting light to those cavernous eyes?

A second later the truth broke on him stunningly. Those papers the man had tried to bargain for, and of which he himself had been in complete ignorance! He knew their whereabouts now. They were in that coat which the fellow had left at Dartleigh when he had unwittingly departed with the wrong garment. He was as sure of that as he was of his own name. He had never examined the coat. After reaching his chambers he had taken it off and had tossed it on a chair, where no doubt it remained. And Linky had jumped to the truth that he really had known nothing about the papers, that they remained undiscovered in the pocket of the coat; and he meant to get them.

All that came in a single flash of thought and almost simultaneously he visioned Madeline Westley kneeling in front of that masked safe listening to the fall of the tumblers. He understood now. She was after those papers which Linky had already found. What they were, why she wanted them, he had not the remotest idea; but that she had at least as much right to them as that man standing at the other side

of the table he was convinced. And it was for him to save them for her. Swiftly he lifted himself from the chair; and as he did so the other snarled in a low menacing voice.

"Sit down, Melcombe! You ain't going to interfere in this, unless you're a bigger simp than I take you for."

Melcombe did not obey. He looked round the crowded restaurant and laughed. The other understood him perfectly. He could not have recourse to any overt action in that place with any hope of getting away with it. A savage light came in the deep-set eyes, and the man spoke again.

"You won't listen to a friendly warning——"

"Friendly!" interjected Melcombe, then laughed again. "I imagine I don't need to interfere. These friends of yours over there will take care of you, Linky, till Scotland Yard asks you to explain things. I'll wish you good night."

Very deliberately he turned his back upon the man and moved slowly to his friend; very well aware that now he shared with the other the attention of Sadie and her companions. He found Lord Bobby cheerfully curious.

"You ruffled that bird, Gregory. What——"

"Shut up, Bobby. Listen!" He lit a cigarette, nonchalantly, and between puffs spoke rapidly. "Go to my chambers. Here's the key." He slid a key-wallet across the table. "There's a grey overcoat on a chair. Get it, and take it to your flat. Be careful of any papers there are in it. . . . You get me?

Don't waste time. We'll go to the cloak-room together. As we come out we'll take an affectionate farewell. . . . Then you'll cut along fast as a taxi can take you. . . . And if you're delayed look out for squalls."

"From what quarter will they blow?"

"More than one possibly. That fellow there—and Sadie's friends . . . Lead the way; but don't hurry, and don't talk anything but drivel. . . . Ready!"

They moved towards the door together. Meeting Luigo at the entrance, Melcombe thrust some notes into his hand.

"No change required, Luigo. There's a man following me, isn't there?"

"The lean-faced gentleman with whom you were conversing, sir. Behind him two gentlemen and a lady who were much interested in watching you and the other."

"Good! Delay the lean one as long as you can, Luigo. You understand?"

"Perfectly, sir."

"Good night, Luigo."

"Good night, sir."

Linky was almost on them as Melcombe turned to follow Lord Bobby. By the time they had retrieved hats and coats he was at their heels, and Lord Bobby having put on coat and hat, spoke loud enough for the man to hear.

"You won't forget to-morrow, Melcombe. Two o'clock sharp at the Oratory. We must see old George through his last ordeal as a bachelor."

"I won't forget," laughed Melcombe.

"Well, so long."

"So long, Bobby."

Lord Bobby strolled out of the cloak-room and disappeared. Melcombe slipped on his overcoat and perched his hat at an angle; whilst Linky audibly cursed the attendant for his slowness. He himself was in no great hurry, and whilst he lit a cigarette thoughtfully considered the situation. Did the fellow mean to shadow him? It seemed probable, since the coat the other had taken by mistake had nothing in it to reveal the domicile of its owner. Anyhow, he would know in a moment or two.

Ignoring the fuming man, he passed from the cloak-room, and at the door encountered the two men who had been with Sadie. As he observed, only one entered, whilst the other mounted guard outside, and he chuckled as he passed out to the street. Apparently Linky's activities were not to be conducted with the secrecy that might be desirable. On the sidewalk he paused for a second; looked round for any sign of pursuit. He saw none. Linky, it seemed, was being interviewed by that fellow who had gone into the cloak-room. So much the better, he thought, and began to stroll at the edge of the kerb looking for a disengaged taxi. He must have walked thirty yards before he saw a "crawler;" which at his signal promptly drew up; and as he gave the man directions to take him to his club, he surveyed the sidewalk as well as he could, without, however, seeing anything of the man whom he had left

at the restaurant. Then he slipped into the vehicle and was driven away.

Arriving at his club, he dismissed the taxi, and entering, found a quiet corner, where for twenty minutes or so he sat smoking, and reflecting on his late encounters, wondering what would be the result of that interview in the cloak-room. Of one thing he was assured. He had not been followed; and in a short time would have the papers that Madeline Westley desired in a safe place. It would not matter, then, if Linky found his way to Hatfield Mansions, for he would be unable to do anything; and he himself would have a very good excuse for renewing acquaintance with the girl. As he reflected, he visioned her kneeling in front of the safe at Dartleigh House, and wondered for the hundredth time what there could be in those papers that she should have taken such a risk.

That she could possibly have anything in common with Linky or those other predatory birds who had been responsible for that murderous wire he did not for a moment believe. And still less could she have any friendly association with that girl with whom he had danced. Sadie belonged to the same class as her men. She was of the savage clan of Chicago May, watching the men with whom she associated, and no doubt carried an automatic somewhere in her fashionable attire. But then Madeline Westley had boasted a pistol, and had held him up with a coolness that was almost professional. He smiled to himself as he re-

called the incident. She had done the thing very well, but not as Sadie would have done it, he was sure; and if Sadie had come suddenly on that dead man in the bed, there would have been no need for restoratives. . . .

He broke off and glanced at the clock. Bobby would have secured that coat now, and it was time he was getting along to the chambers of that lively young man. Leaving his club —no taxi being immediately available, he walked on, glancing round occasionally for any sign of Linky or those others who, whilst they could not be counted Linky's friends, were possibly interested in the same things.

Arriving at the block of chambers where Medway lived, he learned that his friend had just come in; and took the lift to the second floor, where the suite was situated. He found Lord Bobby in the act of mixing himself a whisky-and-soda. The grey overcoat was thrown carelessly upon the table, and without delay he proceeded to go through the pockets. He found what he was searching for in an inside pocket—a long envelope, heavily sealed. He considered it carefully. On the envelope there was a name written across the top right-hand corner. "Horace G. Westley." Nothing else, no inventory of the contents; no indication whether the dead Perelli or Horace G. Westley was the rightful owner. The envelope was tolerably bulky, and that no doubt was the reason for its having been placed in the overcoat pocket, which was larger than the breast-pocket of an ordinary lounge suit such as Linky

had been wearing. That it contained a considerable number of documents was clear; and he was wondering what might be the nature of them when Lord Bobby's voice broke on his reflections.

"That packet has a legal aspect, Powder. Is it your last will and testament?"

"No! But I suspect it supplies the motive for the shooting of that man Perelli."

"God!" Lord Bobby stared. Then he laughed. "You're a wonder. Sherlock and Watson in one. . . . But what's the game? Remember, I've only the foggiest notion that somehow you stepped from the dull paths of rectitude to the lively byways of crime. I ought to be let in on the ground floor."

Melcombe laughed. "Lively enough, Bobby, I can assure you."

"Then the round unvarnished tale deliver. I want to hear it; and I'm prepared to face anything short of the gallows to brisk things up a little, for of all the condemned things in this world politics takes the cake. Don't be selfish and keep a good thing to yourself, Gregory."

Melcombe considered and made up his mind quickly.

"I'll tell you, Bobby. Possibly I shall be glad of your help if those fellows at the restaurant get on my track—and I have no doubt that one of them will try."

"Which? Old Skull-without-the-cross-bones?"

"Yes! Known as Linky—which is the pet-name for Lincoln, I gather. . . . But listen!"

He gave a full account of his adventures of the last twenty-six hours; and Lord Bobby listened with an interest that was flattering. At the end he broke out enthusiastically:

"By George, you have the luck! That girl, now. She was beautiful? And she held you up with a pistol! I call that topping! . . . But that gruesome fellow in the bed? What had he to do with that last-will-and-testament envelope there?"

"I don't know. I suspect it was in his possession and that both Linky and the girl were after it."

"I'd bet on it. And Linky shot Perelli to get it? Must have had a nerve to play the genial host to you, knowing that the owner was dead upstairs?" He broke off and laughed. "I'm glad you didn't tell Teddy Hamilton everything. It would have spoiled the whole show if you had. Teddy's a born sleuth. I was at Wadham with him. Conan Doyle and Le Blanc were his classic authors. . . . We'll have to watch him or he'll spoil the running for us!" He looked at the envelope, and ejaculated: "I would give a shilling to know what that contains."

"And I would give two," laughed Melcombe.

Lord Bobby's face took on a musing look. "Teddy Hamilton would have it open in two ticks—but what is right in a sleuth is not permissible to . . . er—others."

"No!"

"That girl—you're going to let her know you have the packet?"

"I think so. You see, the name on it is——"

"Father, brother, uncle or tenth cousin?"

"I don't know, but——"

A sound of steps outside the door broke on the words, and with a swift intuition of possibilities Melcombe picked up the envelope and thrust it into his pocket, just as someone knocked.

"Yes!" shouted Lord Bobby.

The caretaker and scout of the chambers appeared.

"Mr. Monaci and Mr. O'Hara to see you, sir."

"Never heard of the gentlemen," answered Lord Bobby, and glanced questioningly at his friend, to find confirmation of his own thought. Melcombe nodded, and his host drawled on. "Rum hour for callers, Mitchell. I don't know that I want to be disturbed so late."

"Gentlemen said the business was very urgent, sir."

"Um!" Lord Bobby looked towards a door leading to his sleeping apartment, and nodded significantly to Melcombe, who immediately took the hint and slipped to the other room, leaving the door slightly ajar, whilst his friend interrogated the scout. "Where are these gentlemen, Mitchell?"

"On the landing, sir, by the lift."

"All right. I will see them, but"—his voice dropped to a whisper—"stand by, Mitchell, outside the door. And be prepared for a rough house."

"Yes, sir."

The man turned and spoke to the waiting callers.

"This way, gentlemen." And a moment later announced—

"Mr. Monaci and Mr. O'Hara."

The visitors entered the room as Lord Bobby lifted himself lazily from the lounge chair. Mitchell closed the door behind them, and Lord Bobby, looking at them with an air of interrogation, instantly recognized them. The first was the man whom Melcombe knew as Linky, and the other was one of the two men who had been with the girl Sadie. His face, however, betrayed nothing, and was a mask of politeness, as the pair standing near the door looked swiftly round the room. As they did so the dark eyes of the man who had been at Dartleigh House betrayed disappointment; then Lord Bobby spoke.

"You wished to see me, gentlemen—on urgent business, I understand."

"Yes!" broke out Linky brusquely. "Where's that guy Melcombe?"

CHAPTER VI

LIVELY MOMENTS

LORD BOBBY made a gesture of protest. "Really, Mr. Monaci—or is it Mr. O'Hara?—I do not know why you should adopt that rude tone. These are my chambers, and, as you will observe, I am alone."

"Hell!" The word was almost an explosion. "Don't try that bullydozing stuff on us. We know Melcombe's here. He was trailed an' he ain't left, I'll lay."

"What will you lay?" asked Lord Bobby promptly. "I don't bet as a rule, but when a hall-marked certainty is offered——"

A sudden movement by the other checked the words; and Lord Bobby choked back a laugh as the man picked up the grey coat from the floor, where Melcombe had dropped it. Swiftly the fellow searched the pockets. Another oath broke from him, he dropped the coat, his hand went to his coat pocket, and a second later Lord Bobby found himself looking at the black muzzle of an automatic pistol. He seemed to find the fact incredible. His eyes blinked, he drew his hand over them, as if to brush away some impossible vision; then hurriedly produced a single eye-glass, and having

screwed it into place, he considered the pistol anew.

"Re-e-ally!" he drawled, then with a touch of excited apprehension he said quickly: "I say . . . that's a pistol, isn't it? For heaven's sake do be careful, man—it might go off!"

"It will go off and quick if you don't stop that flip-flop," retorted the other menacingly. "Where's Melcombe?"

"I have explained——" began Lord Bobby tremulously.

"Where is he, you saphead?" shouted Linky, betraying exasperation.

"My dear sir, I am not accustomed to being addressed in such a vulgar way——" Lord Bobby turned towards the bell-push near the fireplace, but the other promptly barked:

"Leave that alone, you boob." The man glanced at his companion. "Take a look round, Monny. There are other apartments. . . . Those doors—— I'll hold this guy."

"One moment, Mr. Lincoln O'Hara." There was a little snap in Lord Bobby's voice. "You are making very free of my chambers. I should like to remind you that I pay the rent——"

"Get going, Monny," broke in the man with the pistol. "Never mind this bonehead."

"You have quite a repertoire of epithets, Mr. O'Hara. If one only knew what they meant the conversation would be interesting. But perhaps where ignorance is bliss—— Yet I must protest. If Mr. Monny takes the liberty you suggest I shall ring the bell."

"If you lift a blame thumb to it——"

"If Mr. Monny moves anywhere but towards the door behind him, I lift the blame thumb," retorted Lord Bobby, and gave a short laugh. "You see, this is not Chicago, where I understand nobody takes the least notice of a pistol-shot. Here it would attract more attention than a thunder-storm—— Ah! Mr. Monny is determined to take the chance. Well——"

Quite deliberately he side-stepped towards the bell-push; his blue eyes flashed as he regarded the other, smilingly; and as the second man moved in the direction of Melcombe's hiding-place, as deliberately he stretched a hand to the bell-push.

"Keep off," growled the man, and moved the pistol menacingly. "Heck! Do you think I'm bluffing?"

"Well, to be candid, I do," drawled Lord Bobby. "And I think it is a very poor bluff. Is that—er—weapon loaded?"

"Loaded! You fool——"

The man Monny was nearer that slightly open door. In a moment he must discover Melcombe. He thrust the door and Lord Bobby judged it was time to act. He laughed suddenly, a laugh which seemed to discompose O'Hara; then he lifted his voice sharply:

"Mitchell!"

As the door behind opened the fellow turned swiftly and in that second Lord Bobby leaped, his fist crashing into the man's neck. The attack was so utterly unexpected that the man reeled, dropping the pistol. Lord Bobby pushed the weapon aside with his foot.

"Take charge of that, Mitchell, and stand clear. I'm going to throw this scoundrel down the stairs."

O'Hara recovering a little sprang towards him snarlingly; evidently with the intention of a rough-and-tumble fight. Lord Bobby side-stepped and gave the man a smashing blow which sent him to the carpet. As he scrambled up, Lord Bobby was behind him and, gripping a wrist, brought it behind the man's back.

"Now, Mr. Lincoln O'Hara, march or——"

A lifted knee was added persuasion. The man jerked forward. In three seconds he was on the landing, in another two at the head of the stairs. The wrist was jerked suddenly upwards, and as the man bent forward, Lord Bobby stepped back and kicked. The man shot off the landing and toppled down the stairs.

"Look out, sir!"

Mitchell's voice lifted in warning reached Lord Bobby's ears. Instinctively he jumped sideways, and the second man in full flight, shot by him, missed his footing and slid down the stairs on his back. A sharp oath from below announced a collision—and Lord Bobby laughed.

"Tallo-ho, Melcombe! We'll hand that pair to the police."

He began to descend the stairs, which were poorly lighted. Then from below came a spurt of flame, a sound that was little more than a plop; and a bullet plugged the staircase wall.

"My God, sir, they're firing!" cried Mitchell.

"Keep back!" shouted Lord Bobby, and sat down sharply.

Again there was a flash, a subdued report, the sound of a bullet as it splintered a stair-rail, then the noise of running feet in the tiled hall, and the crash of a door heavily closed.

"Gone! But, sir——"

Lord Bobby found support for his back against a stair whilst he laughed. Then he stood up; ascended to the landing, looked at Mitchell's perturbed face and laughed again.

"Brief and bright!" he chuckled. "Spoils to the victors. I think I'll take that pistol, Mitchell. It will make a pretty trophy."

He took it, examined it and laughed again. "Safety catch on," he said. "The fellow *was* bluffing after all."

"But not the other, sir; he——"

"Yes! The vicious beggar. But he had a silencer on his artillery." He swung round to Melcombe. "Did he see you?"

"Must have done. When he thrust open the door I was in plain view."

"That settles it, my son. You'll stay here to-night. Mitchell will make up a bed on the chesterfield. You can't go out into the street. That fellow Linky spotted the overcoat. He'll guess that envelope is here in your possession, and as it's latish the streets won't be safe—not when there's a man waiting for you with a silent pistol. . . . Mitchell, forage for blankets and the et ceteras from your quartermaster's stores."

"Yes, sir."

Lord Bobby passed into his chambers and closed the door on Melcombe and himself, then he grinned cheerfully—

"A promising start. Looks as if the next day or two might have a certain liveliness. And that lot have an unlooked-for smartness. How did they guess you were here? Did you know they shadowed you?"

"No. But one of them must have done——"

"Sadie, for a guess. She is smart as new paint! You didn't look for her?"

"Never crossed my mind! . . . But what I can't understand is that those two should have come here together. I will swear that at the Medici they were ready to fly at each other."

"Case of the common enemy . . . united front and all that sort of thing, I imagine. S'pose they both want those papers and have made terms, agreed to divide the spoils. What!"

To Melcombe, considering the matter, his friend's suggestion appeared to be near the facts, and he did not find it particularly consoling.

"If they've decided to act together they will be more dangerous. . . . I must get those papers to Madeline Westley. They must be tremendously important for her to take the risks she did."

"There is the Postmaster-General," laughed his friend. "For tuppence-ha'penny or so he'll play the fairy godfather."

"I mean to deliver them myself," replied Melcombe firmly.

"At Marie et Cie—robes, chapeaux, and lingerie." Lord Bobby chuckled. "Be careful, Powder. You'll be wanting a Savile Row

trousseau if you don't look out—morning coat, striped trousers, white spats, patent leathers, buttonhole gardenia, and that will be the end of you!"

Melcombe ignored this flippancy. A thoughtful look came in his eyes.

"The risk is that passing them on to her may mean the transference of the attention of Linky and Company to her."

"Um! Yes! . . . If they know of her existence."

"There is a chance they don't."

"Got to take it—either way . . . But there is another exit. The name on that envelope—Horace G. Westley. If the girl supplied the address it might be passed to him direct."

"Yes . . . I hadn't thought of that."

"Grey matter, Powder!" laughed Lord Bobby, tapping his flaxen head. "Bound to tell, you know, and just now it's fermenting. I've heard or seen that name before somewhere; but can't remember the circumstances."

"It has a familiar look," agreed Melcombe.

"Maybe after a beauty sleep we'll remember. If we don't——"

"Why then in the morning I go and interview Marie et Cie."

"I'll escort you," answered Lord Bobby, adding with flippant hopefulness: "We may have the luck to light on a mannequin parade."

. . . That luck, however, was denied them, when, after first assuring themselves as well as they could that there was no shadower in the street, they entered a taxi, and following a

devious course made their way to Marlowe Street. Madame Marie's was a small establishment with a solitary model in the window, the name being written on the glass in gilt followed by one word—" Robes ! "

" Robes ! " commented Lord Bobby. " Exclusive and expensive. Nothing under twenty guineas, I'll swear. . . . From the look of the place not the ordinary accommodation address. . . . Lead the way, Sir Galahad. If the lady is as French as her name you will be all right. The Gallic race is romantic. It loves *une affaire.*"

Melcombe led the way into the establishment ; and they found themselves in a carpeted room that boasted a long mirror, a couple of chairs ; and two models displaying, as Melcombe supposed, the latest creations of Madame's art. There was no one in charge, it appeared, but after a moment a heavy dark curtain at the far end was pulled aside, and a tall young lady, modishly attired, came forward with a languid air. She had the flattened hair and the new pallor decreed by the latest fashion, and suggested that energy was a word not in her dictionary. Lord Bobby chuckled softly.

" A drooping lily ! My stars ! Be careful, Powder, or she'll break."

The young lady halted perhaps five feet from them. If she experienced any surprise at the presence of two smart gentlemen in a sanctuary consecrated to ladies' robes, her languorous eyes did not show it.

" Yes ? " she asked in a listless voice.

"I wish to see Madame Marie. Is she within?" asked Melcombe.

"What name?" demanded the lady.

Melcombe produced a card; found a pencil and wrote on it a single word—"Urgent"; then handed it to the girl, who took it as if afraid it might soil her delicate fingers. As she retired towards the curtain slowly, in good order and with the grace of a sailing swan, Lord Bobby was moved to further comment.

"My hat! And to such creatures we make love. No wonder the marriage rate is declining. They're enough to make the Venus de Milo weep tears of marble. Now——"

"S-s-s-s-h! Here comes Madame or I'm mistaken."

Madame proved to be a vivacious Frenchwoman with a command of English that did her credit; and with a bustling energy that was poles asunder from the languid listlessness of her assistant. She had pleasant eyes and surveyed the pair a little roguishly.

"M'sieur Melcombe?" she inquired, glancing at the card.

Lord Bobby lifted his stick and pointed to his friend.

"The culprit, Madame," he said with a laugh.

Madame laughed at him and addressed herself to Melcombe.

"You wish to see me—on a vaire urgent mattaire?" she asked.

"Yes, Madame. I want you to give me a certain lady's address."

Madame's roguishness vanished, austerity displaced animation; her dark eyes were a severe reproof.

"But, M'sieur, I cannot that do . . . I must my clients protect."

"Right, Madame," chuckled Lord Bobby. "The man's a tiger."

For one second there was a flash in Madame's eyes which revealed that she was not so austere as she would appear, and which gave heart of grace to Melcombe.

"Madame," he said, "this is no ordinary affair. It may well be a matter of life and death——"

"Love," quoth Lord Bobby, "is always a desperate thing; as I daresay you know very well, Madame."

Madame visibly and audibly thawed. A little laugh broke from her, as she owned archly:

"But yes, M'sieur, I haf my experiences! What would you? Life is like that!"

Melcombe took charge again.

"This morning, Madame, you received a letter to be forwarded to Miss Madeline Westley——"

"It has already been dispatched, M'sieur. But how you are aware——"

"Because I wrote it, very late, last night; and after posting it, events occurred which make it imperative that I should have Miss Westley's address that I may see her at the very earliest moment. I have something to deliver to her which I know she will be only

too glad to receive, something which cannot be trusted to the post."

In contrast to Lord Bobby's flippant demeanour, Melcombe's manner was very serious and clearly Madame found it impressive.

"I do not know that I ought, M'sieur——" she began hesitatingly.

"But, Madame Marie, as I have explained, the matter is tremendously serious, how serious I cannot tell you——"

A sharp whistle from Lord Bobby broke on the words, and Melcombe looked quickly round. His friend, it seemed, had lost all interest in the conversation, and was staring into the street over the top of a velvet curtain behind the window.

"Excuse me!" he ejaculated suddenly. "A lady friend."

A moment later he had fled the establishment, and Madame looked after him with a vivacious twinkle in her eyes.

"Your friend he is what you call a lady's man, hein?"

"A quite terrible fellow," laughed Melcombe, seeing his way to Madame's heart. "But not serious, you comprehend?"

"One who amuses himself, perhaps, m'sieur?"

"Oh, we must be fair. He gives as well as takes! But, Madame, my question? You will answer it? I assure you there are grave matters that prompt it. Miss Westley's interests are deeply involved. And delay in my finding her may do her irreparable injury. . . . You are her friend as I am——"

"Her costumier, M'sieur."

"But still her friend, I am sure of that. Yesterday when it was possible that necessity to communicate with her might arise, I asked for an address and she gave me yours. Yours was the name she thought of—and she would not have done that had she not been assured of your friendship. . . . You will help me—and her? Please!"

"But, M'sieur, if I should a client lose——"

"You will not. Madame Marie, I swear it is a great service you will do her. She will be grateful. I am very sure of that."

"Yet it is possible——" began the lady musingly, then reached her decision suddenly. "M'sieur Melcombe, you shall the place have. One leetle moment——"

She left him standing there, whilst she herself passed behind the curtain at the far end of the shop—reception-room, or whatever name she gave it. Well pleased that she should agree, Melcombe stared over the velvet screen behind the window into the street, wondering what had taken Lord Bobby away so suddenly. A lady friend he had said, but—— Then he saw him quite unexpectedly. He was standing at the upper window of a rather elegant café across the road, absorbed in watching something in the street. Melcombe was intrigued. Bobby, it appeared, had not gone lightly forth. Some solid reason had prompted that hurried exit, and——

"M'sieur——" He swung round at the sound of madame's voice. He had not heard

her return, but she was behind him, smiling, with a sheet of note-paper in her hand. "The address, I give eet you, against the rules, because I am vaire certain that you are the friend of Mademoiselle."

"A thousand thanks," he cried fervently, looked at the paper, glimpsed an address in Somerset, and heard Madame's laughing voice again.

"M'sieur, as you are in earnest so much, I can for you do better than the paper if you are vaire quick." She glanced at the elegant bracelet watch she wore, and then gave an ejaculation of dismay. "Hélas! already eet is too late, I fear."

"Too late, Madame? What do you mean?"

"In less than an hour, Mademoiselle leaves London——"

"Leaves London! She is here?"

"For a few hours only! Yester evening she arrived and this morning she departs—for the address I have given you, in less than an hour."

"But how do you know?"

"Because I haf a messenger sent to Paddington with a robe for Mademoiselle, a creation for a——"

"Great Jove! She is going by the ten-fifty."

"Yes, M'sieur, and——"

"Madame Marie, pardon my haste. I must go at once. Do not think me ungrateful. I will return another time to thank you—as I am sure will Miss Westley."

He wasted no time. In a twinkling he was out in the street, hurrying across the side walk

to the taxi which was waiting. As he jumped in, he shouted to the driver:

"Paddington. Sprint for all you are worth. There's a pound for you if you catch the ten-fifty train."

"Right, sir."

Not until the taxi was running down the street did he remember Lord Bobby at the café window. But he had no time to spare; and it was too late to do anything now. He would telegraph from the station if he took the train, or telephone a rendezvous for lunch if he did not travel. The main thing was to get to Paddington at all costs before the train left. He fumed at the seeming slowness of the vehicle; when he was held up at crossings, he swore softly, and cursed the slow-moving horse traffic which got in the way.

He had no more than three minutes to spare when he reached the station. He thrust the fare and the promised tip into the driver's hand and fairly raced to the booking-office. Then, ticket in hand, he ran towards the departure platform. As he passed the barrier he had less than half a minute to spare.

"Quick, sir!" the ticket inspector counselled. "She's due to move out."

The guard was waving a green flag as he reached the van.

"Here, sharp, sir. We're off! You can walk up the train——"

Melcombe needed no second invitation. Quick as a bolting rabbit makes its burrow, he leaped into the guard's van. Before he

could get his breath the train began to move, and as the guard jumped in and closed the door, he looked at Melcombe smilingly.

"You cut it rather fine, sir."

"Yes. Couldn't help it. I only made up my mind to travel a few minutes ago, and had to hurry. . . . Now I'll go find a seat."

"If you will wait until we are out of the station, I will come with you, sir."

"No need," said Melcombe, with a laugh. "I'm not in my dotage yet."

He flicked a florin to the man, and began to move up the train, staring into the inner windows of the coaches whilst he sought for Madeline Westley. As it chanced, passing through the third coach, he stumbled on someone else, and that was the second of the two men whom he had seen with Sadie at the Medici. He had but a glimpse of him, as at that moment another passenger opened a newspaper which hid the man from view. He had no doubt, however, about the man's identity; and anxious that he himself should remain unnoticed, he passed on, reflecting that the fellow's presence on the train, unless it were just the wildest coincidence, had an ominous look. Two coaches farther along he found Madeline Westley, alone in a first-class compartment. She was staring out of the window and did not see him until he slid back the corridor door and greeted her.

"Good morning, Miss Westley."

Then she turned swiftly. Her face flushed suddenly; a welcoming light leaped in her eyes.

"You!" she ejaculated. "Of all the fortunate chances——" The rest was unspoken; and without waiting for any invitation other than her welcoming words implied, Melcombe slipped into the compartment and closed the door behind him.

CHAPTER VII

QUICK WORK

MELCOMBE laughed as he took his seat. "It is not all chance," he said, "though to be sure I had luck in catching the train. The guard's van saved me from being left desolate on the platform."

"Not all chance!" exclaimed the girl. "Do you mean that you . . . that you——"

"Yes." He laughed again. "I was on your trail, and I fancy I am not the only one."

"Ah! You have seen Sacco?"

"I don't know if that is his name. But in one of the coaches there is a man who is certainly associated with someone who is definitely not a friend of yours—a grizzled-haired fellow, sharp-featured, dark-eyed and yellow-complexioned. Sacco, I take it, is an Italian name, and it fits right enough."

"There is no question. It is Sacco."

A troubled look came on the girl's face, and Melcombe spoke again.

"I don't want to butt into your affairs too much, Miss Westley; but if you don't mind telling me—who is Sacco?"

"No friend of mine or of——" The girl broke off sharply, as if she had been on the edge of

an indiscretion; and Melcombe, ignoring what had gone unspoken, said quietly:

"That much I guessed, of course. You think he is on this train because you are?"

"I am almost sure of it. He was just behind me when I booked, and later I saw him speak to the porter who had my suitcase."

"Read the label, I suppose. . . . You know the fellow?"

"I have never spoken to him. I have seen him twice before when he called at—er—— But that was more than a year ago. He is Italian by name, but an American-born citizen, and . . . and a scoundrel!"

"Haven't a doubt of it," agreed Melcombe with conviction. "He looks it. . . . You think he means to interfere with you?"

"No. To follow me only, I think; but that is the very worst thing that could happen at the present time."

She offered no reason for this statement, and Melcombe asked for none.

"Then we must get rid of the fellow," he said cheerfully.

"But how? . . . If, as you think, he read the label on my suitcase, that will be very difficult, won't it?"

Melcombe lifted his eyes to the rack. The suitcase was there, with a red tag tied to the handle. Rising, he read the label deliberately before replying, with a laugh:

"If that is the only label——"

"There is no other," intervened Miss Westley.

"Then the job should not be difficult."

Melcombe laughed. "The label indicates only the station. It does not give the address to which you are going, which I take it is——" His hand went to his pocket, and, producing the sheet of note-paper he had received from Madame Marie, read aloud what was written there in a sprawling hand:

"Shapgate House, nr. Dunster, Somerset."

"How did you know?" A hint of alarm mingled with the surprise in her tones, and in her dark eyes was a light of apprehension. "Where did you get that information?"

"It is very simple," he said, speaking reassuringly. "Yesterday you gave me an address to which I could write in case——"

"Madame Marie told you?" she asked tersely.

"Under great pressure and because she believed I was your friend. You must not blame her. You won't, I am sure, when I have explained. . . . Last night I had occasion to write to you, warning you that the police were making inquiries about one who left heel-marks and prints of a gloved hand and fingers at Dartleigh House; which they seemed to have connected with a young lady who was seen to leave her car at the gates yester-morning——"

"Oh!" broke in the girl in a troubled voice. "How do you know? There is nothing in the papers——"

"Not likely to be," he answered, laughing to reassure her. "The police traced me by means of a number-plate which was wrenched off my stolen car. The man who called is an old

friend of mine—keen as mustard, who doesn't credit me with the murder of Perelli, in whom it appears he was interested with another man from Chicago—name of Railton."

"Railton. I have heard of the man. He is a Chicago detective, who has the reputation of being beyond all graft."

"A rare bird, I should say, in Chicago!" Melcombe laughed again. "He went down to Devonshire yesterday on hearing the news of Perelli's death, whilst Hamilton—my chum—looked up me. I told him all I knew, but for one thing, I did not mention you."

"Thank heaven!"

"I think he guessed—no, I am sure he knew there were omissions in my story, but he didn't worry me over them too much."

"Then he doesn't know—can't know that I . . . that I was at Dartleigh?"

"Not unless he has the colossal luck to stumble on the truth. And I don't see how that can happen. . . . But to continue: Madame Marie posted my letter to you this morning. No doubt you will get it to-morrow. After writing it, however, I had a quite amazing piece of luck." He broke off, and then inquired: "When you were burgling that safe at Dartleigh, you were—for a guess—looking for certain papers?"

"Yes; but how you know——"

"I have them."

For a moment a great light of relief shone in the dark eyes; then they turned on him in burning glance. As well as if she had shouted it aloud he knew the doubt that had assailed her.

She was wondering how he knew about those papers, how he had acquired them, and was on the point of connecting him with the men who were not her friends. Then the doubt died. He saw trust in her eyes, and knew that her faith in him held.

"You have them?"

"Yes! I think so. A bulky envelope which I fancy was stolen from Dartleigh by the man who played host to me, two nights ago. It has a name—Horace G. Westley—in one corner, and——"

"There is no question. They are the papers I was looking for at that dreadful house."

He waited, hoping that she would take him further into her confidence; but she did not. Instead she asked:

"You have them with you?"

"Yes!" He laughed. "But I am afraid they are not immediately available. I shall need a dressing-room and a pair of scissors before I can produce them. And, anyhow, I would not give them to you now for a fortune."

"You would not give——"

"I would not let you run the risk of possessing them—with that fellow Sacco three coaches away, and aware of your presence. If, as I think is the case, Perelli was shot by the man who had those papers and that the deed was done in order to obtain possession of them, you must see that there is a very great risk if you had them in your keeping. You would be in peril every moment. And I cannot allow that."

"But you——" began the girl.

"A man; and on holiday!" He laughed as if well-pleased. "A little excitement will be welcome, after the dullness of working days. If you knew what it was to be private secretary (unpaid) to a distinguished politician, you would understand how welcome any sort of adventure is to me—even being trailed and assaulted by rascals!" He laughed again, and added: "So since I do not mind the risk, and do mind you taking it, I propose to carry the packet of papers in person to whomsoever you would have receive them."

Madeline Westley considered. "That would do very well if Sacco does not know you."

"If he has as good a memory for faces as he has for names, I am afraid he will. He saw me last night in the Medici restaurant, and when he heard my name he was so startled that he dropped a glass of wine."

"But how can he know your name?"

"I thought that out last night. He was one of the fellows who stole my car. There were some papers in the car pocket—the spare insurance certificate. If he or his fellows chanced to look at them, they would know. I can think of no other explanation. But that is neither here nor there. As I said, if Sacco has a visual memory he will recognize me as sure as a gun. Does that interfere with the plan that was in your mind?"

"Not necessarily. My thought was that as you have my address at Shapgate, you might bring them there, to-morrow, after dark."

"To-morrow after dark!" he echoed, a little surprised.

"Yes. That is important. You must not be seen. On no account must any of these men become aware of the presence there of the man to whom you will deliver those papers."

"The man—Horace G. Westley?"

"My father," she explained simply. "You do not know how grateful he will be. Those papers are almost life and death to him."

Melcombe was grateful for the confidence. "To-morrow night after dark—shall we say eleven o'clock?—the papers shall be delivered."

"Thank you," answered the girl.

"But I claim the privilege of seeing you safe to-day. You must get away without Sacco being able to follow you. You will have a car at the station?"

"No! I shall have to hire. I should have driven down, but for the fact that last night I broke a piston."

Melcombe considered. He saw difficulties ahead. At a small country station a determined shadower would be difficult to shake off. Even if there should be but one car available for hire, the fellow would only have to wait a little while until it returned in order to discover the girl's exact destination. Some other way must be found; and in a moment he saw one.

"Miss Westley," he said, with a laugh, "I don't think we shall wear our tickets out to-day."

"Wear our tickets out?"

"I mean, go through to Dunster. That would

be playing straight into Sacco's hands. At a wayside station it would be impossible to avoid him—— Do you think he can possibly know the address you are making for?"

"That is quite impossible. . . . No one knows except Madame Marie, whom I trusted in case I should hear from you. The house has been taken furnished from a London Agency—not in my father's name."

For a second Melcombe permitted himself to wonder why there should be such secrecy about the matter; then answered crisply: "That is fortunate. It makes the thing much simpler. We have only to give our friend the slip somewhere on the railway and complete the journey by road." He thought for a moment; then he said: "I shall leave you now for a little while. Sacco may take it into his head to stroll down the corridor; and in that case we had better not be observed together, for though he knows you are here, he won't be expecting to find me on the train at all. I will return presently and tell you my plan."

Leaving the compartment, and moving forward so that he would not have to pass the compartment where Sacco was, he found a seat in the next coach. Then he borrowed a time-table from a restaurant attendant, and studied it diligently. There were two stops which suited his purpose, Bristol and Taunton. At the latter, in order to reach Dunster, the girl would have to change to a slow local train stopping at practically every station between there and Minehead. That would offer the advantage of

a shorter journey by road ; but it had a drawback. If Sacco discovered Madeline Westley had left the train, he could leave it himself within a very few miles, and, if an automobile were available, might overtake her. On the other hand, if she left it at Bristol, Sacco would be at the double disadvantage of being left to wonder if the girl had changed her destination, and willy-nilly would have to continue the journey to Taunton.

" Bristol ! " he decided ; and began to think out plans.

He could think of only one that was at all feasible. The girl must remain in the train until the very last moment and not leave it until it was on the point of moving. If she remained in her compartment, without entering the corridor until the moment to emerge arrived, Sacco, knowing her destination, and assured that all was well, might never see her desert the train ; whilst the last thing in his mind would be that she would leave it before her journey was completed. He thought out the simple plan to its last details ; then when the first luncheon was announced, having from behind a newspaper seen the Italian pass along the corridor towards the restaurant car, he hurried back to Madeline Westley. He explained clearly what she must do ; and then taking charge of her suitcase, carried it to his own compartment and waited for Sacco's return. The fellow's face, he saw, was flushed ; and he had no doubt that drink of some kind was responsible for it. So much the better, he thought. A man who takes too

much alcohol at lunch is prone to feel sleepy afterwards; and if Sacco slept at Bristol, all would be well.

He saw Madeline Westley pass along the corridor to the second lunch; waited a little while and followed, taking a seat at the far end of the saloon, his back to the engine, with an outer seat from which he could command the farther door and the whole length of the coach. Some little time passed; indeed the luncheon was half-way through, when a thing occurred which he had not anticipated. At the far end of the dining-car a man appeared—Sacco. He stood for a little time surveying the passengers, apparently assured himself that Miss Westley was taking lunch; then the man's gaze travelled forward, meeting his own squarely. No flicker of recognition came in them, the man's face remained quite blank, yet Melcombe had an uncomfortable feeling that the man had recognized him. Half an hour later he was sure of it.

Smoking in the corner of his compartment, he saw Sacco pass up and down the corridor twice, on each occasion examining him furtively. On his part, Melcombe affected to be unaware of the scrutiny, but foresaw difficulties if the man suspected that he was in touch with Madeline Westley; with whom, now, in view of Sacco's manifest suspicions, he dared not attempt to communicate. . . . Bath was passed and the train was approaching Bristol when he himself took a walk down the corridor. Opposite the compartment where Sacco was

seated reading what from its abundant pages and illustrations was clearly an American Sunday paper, he had the luck to encounter the ticket inspector. As he handed his ticket, he asked a question, carelessly, but in a voice sufficiently loud for the Italian to hear.

"This train goes through to Taunton, doesn't it?"

"Yes, sir. Next stop after Bristol."

"Have you any idea how long I shall have to wait for the stopping train to Minehead?"

The inspector consulted a folder time-table, and gave the information.

"Train to Minehead is due to start ten minutes after the arrival of the express."

"Thank you, inspector."

He moved on, sure that Sacco had been interested in the conversation, and returning a little while after, did not so much as glance at the Italian. A few minutes later the train ran into Temple Meads, and before it had pulled up he was at the window with Miss Westley's suitcase on the floor at his feet. He signalled a porter and as the door opened thrust the case into the man's hand.

"Get a taxi," he said, "and wait for me."

"Yes, sir."

Jumping out of the train, he hurried to a waiting-room, and from its shelter watched anxiously the coach where the Italian was. Would he remain in his seat or take up a position by the window? As it chanced, the man did neither. He left the train and walked to the bookstall, in which he appeared to be deeply

interested ; though as he made no purchase, Melcombe suspected that he was really watching both the train and the exit from the station.

He himself looked at the train. He wondered if the girl was aware of the fact that Sacco had left his compartment and as he did so saw her approach an open window. She was hatless, and as she leaned forth, idly surveying the platform, the careless and bored spectator to the life, he chuckled approval.

"Nerves cool and steady. She'll do it—given an even chance."

She signalled to a boy with a tray of chocolates and cigarettes slung round his neck, and made a purchase. Melcombe spared a glance for Sacco. The latter was watching the girl furtively, but as she received her change and withdrew from sight, he left his post of observation and began to stroll slowly down the platform towards his own coach. He reached it and entered just as the guard, with whistle at his mouth, lifted his green flag. A porter banged the door after him, and he took up his position at the window, leaning out, elbows on the frame, his head in the direction of the engine, clearly watching the coach where the girl had her seat.

Melcombe lost hope. There was no more than two seconds to go, and the man's vigilance made it impossible for the girl to leave the train unobserved. He gave his attention to the coach where she was. He could not see her at the door ; nor was she visible in the corridor. Possibly she was aware of the Italian's alert

watch ; but if she were going to leave the train, she was running it rather fine. In another——

"Stand clear!"

The whistle sounded, the green flag was waved, and the train began to move. Tense with anxiety, he watched the girl's coach. She did not appear.

"Missed the chance, by heaven!"

He ran out of the waiting-room with some notion of trying to enter the moving train. His intention was manifest, and a voice shouted stentoriously :

"Keep back there! KEEP BACK!"

There was nothing else for it. The train was quickening speed. To attempt to enter would be mere madness ; and, chagrined, he stood there, his face a faithful index of his feeling. Sacco's compartment drew level. The man was still at the window and he grinned his appreciation of Melcombe's plight, turning his head to watch him. Then there was a sudden change. The grin vanished and the face was twisted with rage ; whilst the dark eyes looking beyond Melcombe fairly blazed. Melcombe turned to discover the cause of this transformation. As he did so, his heart leaped and he became near to shouting with relief, for hurrying towards him, hat in hand, her eyes dancing with excitement, was Madeline Westley. Even as he saw her he divined what had happened. The girl anticipating that Sacco would watch her coach, and probably her coach only, had used the brief interval between her appearance at the window and the watcher's return from the bookstall to

run along the corridor towards the guard's van, and with Sacco in front of her, staring in the direction of the engine, at the psychological moment had left the train. He laughed with pleasure at her triumph, and turned once more to look at the man whom she had cheated. The Italian was still leaning out of the window. His face had a convulsive look. Melcombe had a thought that if the man were not careful he might have a fit; but was not in the least troubled at the idea. Lifting a hand, he waved the man an ironical farewell; then turned again to greet the excited girl.

CHAPTER VIII

SHAPGATE HOUSE

"THAT was cleverly done, Miss Westley. I had almost given up hope."

The girl gave a little laugh of excitement and triumph.

"I had to wait until the very last moment," she said. "I knew that Sacco was watching. I bought those chocolates in order that he might see me; and then I hurried down the corridor, and dropped out at the psychological moment." She laughed again. "I thought you were going to re-enter the train."

"I meant to. But the business was too desperate."

"And now?" asked the girl.

"There is a taxi waiting for us. Your suitcase is already in it. We will drive to a garage and hire a car in which to complete the journey. With luck we shall be at your destination before the Italian reaches Dunster. But the earlier we start the better."

He led the way from the platform, found the porter, whom he had sent with the suitcase, standing by a taxi, tipped the man, and excusing himself for a moment or two went back to the platform. There he sought out the

telegraph office and dispatched a couple of telegrams—one to his garage, the other to Lord Bobby Medway. Then he returned to the taxi, and after conferring with the driver, he and the girl were driven to a garage in the city.

Twenty minutes later they took the road in a Daimler saloon, with a chauffeur whose instructions were to make the pace ; and who, once they were clear of the city, did so with enthusiasm.

"Now," laughed Melcombe, "we are fairly on our way—as Sacco is on his, and before he catches the local for Minehead we shall be almost at our destination."

Madeline Westley nodded. "Yes ! . . . But if you had not come to my help——"

He lifted a hand deprecatingly. "S-s-s-h-h ! Miss Westley. We are not out of the wood yet. . . . I have no doubt that Sacco will rake the countryside until he finds your destination."

"But if he does not find it before to-morrow night, it will not matter. Once my father is in possession of those papers you carry, there will be no cause for him to fear."

Melcombe waited, wondering what it was the man feared, and hoping that the girl would tell him. But, whatever it was, the girl did not unfold the secret, and he was left speculating. After a time he spoke again, inquiring :

"Do you know a young woman of the name of Sadie ? "

"I know several Sadies," answered the girl.

"This one is a smart little lady—and a friend of that fellow in the train, I imagine."

Miss Westley shook her head. "No, I do not think I know her."

"That is a pity."

"Why?"

"Because you may run against her unknowingly, and she has, I fancy, rather a keen nose for a trail. Last night, I will wager, she followed me to the rooms of a friend, where presently we were visited by two of her chums, Mr. Lincoln O'Hara and a fellow of the name of Monaci——"

"They were together?" asked the girl in a tone of troubled amazement.

"Yes! . . . You find that surprising?"

"Very! They are both enemies of my father, but I did not know they were team-mates."

"A recent development, I imagine. Certainly on the night we were at Dartleigh, Monaci and his friends were, I think, planning to break Linky's neck. They must have patched up a truce, and entered into a compact for mutual benefit."

"Which means a combination against my father."

Very much in the dark though he was in relation to Horace G. Westley and the reason for the enmity of the others against him, Melcombe thought the girl's idea a likely one, and owned to it with a nod.

His companion's concern deepened.

"Oh," she whispered, more to herself than to him. "If they should find him, before he arrives at Shapgate!"

"But why should he arrive there at all?"

asked Melcombe quickly. "It is certain that Sacco will call his fellows to the hunt, if, as I imagine, he was set to trail you. Why can't you meet your father at some other rendezvous? A wire sent to him——"

"That is impossible. He is moving about. I do not know his immediate address. Indeed I only know that he will be at Shapgate to-morrow night. So it is there that we must meet."

Melcombe saw the difficulty, and saw something else which troubled him more. In a house set on Exmoor, particularly if it chanced to be off the track of things, anything might happen, if Linky and the others discovered the whereabouts of the girl and her father. And that possibility was not to be ignored. Sacco, though now he had lost the girl for a little time, knew the direction of the trail. Starting with the idea that Dunster was the nearest station to the girl's destination, he might easily stumble on the destination itself. And there was another thing on which he was moved to ask the information.

"Will your father come by rail or road?"

"I don't know," answered the girl quickly. "Why?"

"It occurred to me that if these fellows have any suspicion that he is making for Shapgate they may watch the station."

Madeline Westley was much troubled at the thought, and her apprehension showed in her dark eyes.

"You think they would follow him?"

"I don't know what the trouble is," he re-

minded her. "Am I right in thinking that the concern of these people is less with your father than with those papers for which, as I am convinced, Perelli was murdered?"

"I . . . I should not say that. The papers and my father are probably equally important in their view. If they can secure the papers they will have him in the hollow of their hands, and——"

She broke off sharply, offering no further explanation, and consumed with anxiety as he was, Melcombe forbore to press for one, turning to another phase of the situation.

"When you reach Shapgate, you will be alone until your father arrives?"

"Not alone! There is a housekeeper and her husband who together look after the place."

Concerned as he was for her welfare, he did not find the information particularly reassuring. A countryman and his wife; they would be little protection against such rascals as they had to deal with, if the men should decide on violent courses. Exmoor might offer solitude; but the solitude would be just an opportunity for scoundrels who were without scruples and held the law in contempt. It was, he thought, just as well that he had sent that telegram to Bobby Medway, who, when he received it, would no doubt secure the Alvis and promptly take the road to the West. Then the girl spoke again.

"You are thinking that I may be troubled—that those men may arrive at Shapgate before my father?"

"Something of that sort. One has to look at all the possibilities, you know. But you will have one guard at any rate."

"You?"

"Of course. I propose to watch until your father arrives, when I can hand those papers to him."

"That's very good of you," replied the girl, a little quiver of emotion in her voice. "I do not know why you do so much for . . . for a stranger."

He laughed at the word. "You call yourself that, Miss Westley? It is not so I think of you. I feel as if we had known each other for years."

"And it is less than forty-eight hours, really."

"Pooh! Time is nothing where human relationships are concerned. You may know a man or a woman for years and remain strangers at the end; and in the very moment of meeting with others know them for your friends. There are affinities which assert themselves, and refuse to be denied."

He spoke with conviction, and as the girl's eyes met his a little flush came in her face.

"You seem very sure, Mr. Melcombe——"

"It is not seeming only. I am sure—quite sure."

"And yet," she said softly, "you know so little—of—of me."

"Enough to make me eager to serve you," he answered, with some ardour. "You move among mysteries that I do not understand; but that is nothing. I am content to be in

your confidence just as far as you allow me to be."

"Oh!" cried the girl. "I could trust you altogether. But the secret is not mine."

"Then I do not ask to share it. It is enough that I can be of use to you."

Again the girl's eyes met his, and for a second a soft light gleamed in them. Then she spoke simply.

"I am very grateful."

For a long time neither of them spoke. Madeline Westley stared out of the window watching the changing panorama, whilst Melcombe became immersed in his thoughts. As he leaned back in his corner he could feel the stiffness of the envelope which he had sewn into his waistcoat, and he wondered what secret it held. That it was no small thing he was assured when he remembered the dead man in the locked room at Dartleigh House, and the anxiety of Lincoln O'Hara and his associates to secure it. He found himself hazarding guesses as to its nature. He wondered if the secret had to do with some international relationship, or with the locality of treasure—oil, gold, diamonds—the stock ingredients of romantic literature.

There were possibilities there, he thought, and yet he had a conviction that the secret had to do with none of them. But if not one of these things, what? He found no answer to his own question. That Madeline Westley's father was in some way in jeopardy until he was in possession of the papers was clear, but the nature of the risk was hidden from him, and until the

girl offered an explanation, or until Horace G. Westley himself made things clear, it seemed that he must remain in ignorance.

Immersed in thought, he lost count of time, and was surprised when the car ran into Bridgwater, and swung westward for the coast road. He glanced at Madeline Westley. She appeared to have fallen asleep; and again he gave himself to thought. In a very little time now they would be on the borders of Exmoor, and running for the house at Shapgate, where it seemed Horace G. Westley hoped to find sanctuary. Would the place come up to expectation or would it merely provide a favourable opportunity for Linky and Company to achieve whatever end they were pursuing?

The latter seemed to him to be very probable; and as he glanced at the sleeping girl, his heart quickened with anxiety for her. Horace G. Westley was not due to arrive at Shapgate until to-morrow, and that meant that if her father's enemies were aware of the place she was making for, Madeline Westley would be at their mercy for a whole twenty-four hours. He shivered a little at the thought. The dead Perelli was evidence that nothing would be allowed to stand in the way of the accomplishment of their purpose; whilst the shooting at Lord Bobby's rooms last night was indicative of the fact that they were prepared to take desperate chances. If they knew the girl's destination, and discovered that she was alone at Shapgate, anything might happen.

He realized that quite clearly, and he was

under no illusion as to the situation. There was peril in it for the girl, who, tired by the long journey, dozed at his side. And as he glanced at her he knew that he must do what he could to protect her until her father arrived at Shapgate. Whatever happened he was in this adventure until Madeline Westley was safe. On that he was resolved. It was not quite the holiday that he had planned for himself; but up to date the departure from routine had provided an excitement which was exhilarating; and which promised to be not less fruitful in the immediate future.

At Dunster they swung southward, and when they reached the village of Cutcombe the driver found it necessary to consult both Madeline Westley and one of the villagers before proceeding farther. A little while later they took a side-road which seemed to be leading right into the heart of the moor, and presently on the right Melcombe recognized the great height of Dunkery. This was a country that he knew, having hunted with the Devon and Somerset for a couple of seasons; and whilst the girl remained silent, staring out of the window apparently lost in thought, he watched the rolling moors, wondering what the issue of this journey would be. They worked round the hill, and presently came to a house that was half farm, half inn, with a battered sign swinging over the door, on which was depicted a much-faded stag. There they inquired their way again, found that Shapgate was little more than a mile ahead, and with that news Melcombe descended

and had a talk with the farmer-innkeeper. When he re-entered the car he laughed and explained the purpose of his consultation.

"Lodgings for the night," he said. "This is the nearest inn and, as I gather, the nearest house to Shapgate; so I shall be almost next door in case of need."

"I do not know how to thank you——"

"If you try," he laughed, "I shall be angry." He looked out of the window and saw a wisp of cloud that hung like smoke about the Beacon. He nodded in the direction of it. "If that comes down," he said, "no one will find the way to Shapgate who does not know it very well."

The girl considered the cloud a little wonderingly. "I do not understand."

"Mist!" he said. "I know Exmoor. If the mist spreads over this part of the moor, Shapgate will be impossible for anyone but a native."

"Then my father may be delayed," she said, a little anxiously.

"By Jove, yes! I had forgotten that possibility. But no doubt he will be able to get hold of a moor man who will guide him here."

The girl looked at the veiled Beacon again. "If he were safely here," she said impulsively, "I could pray for the mist to come thick as a blanket."

"You will not need to pray, I fancy. You will see the cloud-cap is thickening; and there's a drift of mist on that slope over there. If it spreads——"

The hooting of the horn broke on his words,

and through the window Melcombe saw a man driving a huddle of sheep along the narrow road. The car slowed down, a dog barked and snapped at the heels of the sheep, hurrying them forward; the shepherd stood on one side, and as they drew level spoke to the driver.

"You'm vor Shapgate, maybe?"

"That's it!" answered the driver.

"Be just round the turn. You'll zee the gate in front of ee."

"Good hearing," laughed the driver, and drove on.

At the turn they passed the sheep huddled together in a narrow bay in the road, held there by the intelligent dog; and half a minute later saw a grey stone house with tarred roof, set among stunted trees, surrounded by a low wall, with a white gate, on which the paint was peeling, standing open. It had, thought Melcombe, a forlorn and desolate look, and for a man seeking solitude, it was certainly the place. The girl considered it with disfavour.

"A dreary homestead," she remarked.

"And set at the world's end," laughed Melcombe. "Even Dunkery is hidden." Then he gave the driver instructions: "Drive right in."

They passed the gate, ran along a short ill-kept drive and pulled up in front of the house, the door of which stood open. Almost immediately a motherly middle-aged woman made her appearance, and as Melcombe descended from the car, and stood waiting for the girl to descend, hurried forward.

"Good afternoon," she said. "You'll be Mr. Martin, I guess?"

"No," he answered smilingly, as he registered the name in his mind. "But here is Miss—er——"

"Good afternoon to ee, Miss Martin. You'm terr'ble welcome! Us wondered how you'd manage to find the way. But here you be, safe an' sound."

"Yes," the girl laughed, though a flush had come to her face at the name given her; a name which, however, as Melcombe noted, she accepted without demur.

"Well, if wee will step right in, Missy. Tea be almost ready."

The driver of the car took the suitcase to the house, and the girl turned swiftly to Melcombe.

"You will stay to tea, Mr. Melcombe?" she asked in a conventional tone.

"Thank you! I shall be delighted, Miss—er—Martin."

The girl's face flushed again. She looked round and saw the woman of the house following in the wake of the man and the suitcase, then she stamped her foot and spoke with some vexation.

"Oh, how I hate this deceit! . . . But it is necessary for my father's sake."

"And necessity knows no law," he laughed cheerfully. "Thank heaven, Martin is an easy name to remember."

They moved to the door together, and entering, met the driver of the car, whom the girl insisted on paying though Melcombe suggested a

basis of fifty-fifty. The car departed and the woman of the house, after explaining that her name was Mrs. Snowe, led the way to a dining-room which was a surprise. It was panelled with old oak, had a polished floor of the same wood, with a few good rugs, an oak table which looked as if it had come from some old monastery, and with genuine Jacobean chairs. A single picture was built in the panelling above the open hearth with its fire-dogs of polished steel, and fire of peat and coal. The picture was that of a mild-looking old man, in a velvet coat and stock, and had a name painted on the frame—John Shapgate, Esquire.

Melcombe considered the name, and then asked: "Who was John Shapgate, Mrs. Snowe?"

"The gentleman who built the house. A scholarly old body, who was crazy about the birds an' deer on the moor. Wrote a book about 'em, he did, an' made a little stir in the world, I've a-heard. His grandson do own the place now but can't a-bide to live here, an' as by law he can't sell, he d'let it to anybody that'll take it, but it be mostly empty in winter, being zo mortal solitary."

"Solitary enough," agreed Melcombe, and as the woman hurried away to dish the tea, turned with a smile to the girl: "I'm afraid you will be lonely here with no company but the sheep and the ponies."

"You are forgetting the deer," she laughed back.

"Yes," he said, "and they're worth remembering."

"But they will not have my company long," she laughed again. "When you have delivered those papers to my father, I do not think we shall linger here. . . . But you will excuse me a minute."

She left the room, and evidently sought out the housekeeper, for a moment or two later he caught the woman's voice.

"This way, Missy."

The sound of footsteps on the stairs followed, and he moved towards the mullioned window and looked forth. There was a lawn in front of the house, rather roughly cut ; beyond that the stunted trees, and the wall which bounded the place. A few ferns and straggling flowers represented the only attempt at gardening, and it was plain that either Mrs. Snowe's husband was no horticulturist or understood very well the limitations imposed by the moor. He looked farther. The rolling moor, with here and there a dark patch that he knew for scrub-oak, was all that was to be seen. There was no other house in sight ; and The Stag inn must, he reflected, be the nearest habitation. He whistled thoughtfully to himself. If Sacco got on the trail and found Shapgate and brought his fellows down, there might be lively times in such a solitary place. He thought of that other house with its murdered owner and his eyes grew very grave. Was it wise to risk even a chance so remote ?

He was still pondering that question when he caught a sound of light footsteps behind him. He turned quickly, to find Madeline Westley,

her outer garments discarded, dressed now in some clinging material; a dainty picture in that dark panelled room. His eyes lit with appreciation, then as he thought of the moment when he had first seen her, he laughed suddenly.

"What have you done with your pistol?"

Perhaps she shared his thought of that first meeting, for she laughed back.

"It is in my suitcase. . . . I have done with holdups."

He glanced at the dainty bag she carried, the laughter died from his face, and the grave look came back.

"That bag would hold it, wouldn't it?" he inquired.

"Why? What do you mean?" she cried quickly.

"Just that it is well to be prepared. There is no need for alarm, of course, but, well—this is a very lonely house."

"You think that Sacco will find his way here?"

"I hope not. It is remote enough for him not to discover it. And our tracks are well concealed. . . . But one never knows."

The dark eyes met his own steadily for a moment, then she answered quietly: "I will fetch it . . . at once."

She left the room, and returned just as Mrs. Snowe brought in the tea. Seating herself at the table, she asked quite calmly: "Cream? . . . Sugar?"

"Both! One lump!"

No further reference was made to the pistol, or to the possibility of the need for it; but

whilst they talked of general things—of the moor, of the charm of the old furniture in the room—once or twice the girl's eyes turned to the window and stared out into the bleak garden in a troubled way. Melcombe noticed the fact, but did not remark upon it, and half an hour later, when a wisp of mist appeared, and hung like smoke among the trees outside, he rose.

"I must go," he said. "The mist is coming down. If it thickens I shall have a difficult walk."

Madeline Westley made no attempt to delay his departure. She accompanied him to the door, and, after a glimpse at the garden now half veiled in the grey vapour, as far as the gate. There she offered her hand.

"I . . . I shall see you to-morrow?"

Her eyes met his. The trouble was there very plain to be seen, and there was an appealing note in her voice which moved him deeply.

"Trust me!" he said fervently. "I will not fail you."

"I have no right to ask your help, but . . . but——"

"Please!" he broke in. "I am only too happy to serve you. You must believe that. You do? Tell me."

The dark eyes met his again, and then were swiftly veiled by the long lashes, whilst the warm blood flushed her face.

"Yes!" she whispered tumultuously. "Oh, yes!"

"Then I am happier still."

He said no more but began to walk away in

the mist. When a few yards away, he turned. She was still at the gate, dimly visible through the grey vapour. He waved his hand, received an answering wave, and marched on, whistling a cheerful air. A little farther along the road he glanced back again, but the girl was no longer visible; and Shapgate itself was hidden in the swirling mist.

CHAPTER IX

A NOCTURNAL CALL

AS Melcombe walked on the mist thickened, becoming a fine drizzle which threatened to soak him to the skin before he could arrive at his destination. He could see no more than half a dozen yards in front of him. All contours were obliterated, and on either hand nothing was visible save yellowing bracken and dripping bents. But with the rough road under his feet it was impossible to go astray, for the road led directly to the inn, and the only risk was that he might overshoot the latter in the opaque greyness of the mist.

He walked quickly, his mind in a glow, his heart filled with a cheerfulness which was an affront to external circumstances. For a time he thought nothing of any shadowing peril; the affairs of Horace G. Westley appeared of little importance; and he visioned a girl's face with great dark eyes glowing with faith, whilst the whispered "Yes! Oh, yes!" made a soft music in his ears.

But presently sterner things thrust themselves into notice, and again he found himself reflecting upon the possibilities of the situation. Long before this, Sacco, if he had not given up

the chase at Taunton, must have completed his rail journey, and would be casting around for the scent which might lead him across the moor to Shapgate. He considered carefully the chances which might aid the Italian in his purpose. The railway station and Dunster itself would serve him not at all. Only at Cutcombe as it appeared to him could the pursuer find anything to help him on his way; and the chances that the fellow would make that out-of-the-way place, and stumble on the villager from whom they had inquired their way, seemed exceedingly remote.

Yet the possibility was not to be altogether ignored. Chance was a tricky jade, and the thing least expected was the one to anticipate. There was further another thing that might serve the Italian. If losing the trail he doubled back to Bristol, with a little patience he might discover the taxi-driver who had been employed, and that would give the fellow a straight line to the garage where the Daimler had been hired. There, under half a dozen pretexts, he might gather the information that would lead him to the lonely house in the heart of the moor which was Westley's chosen rendezvous with his daughter. That, of course, would take time; and unless the fellow had information which from Madeline Westley's account of the situation it seemed he could not possibly have, to-morrow was the earliest time that he could be looked for on the moor.

That was in a measure reassuring; and there was further reassurance in the thought that

almost certainly the Italian would call at the inn to make inquiry. Travellers on the moor would be few; callers at the remote inn-farm quite rare birds; and he himself needed only to watch the road and take note of such callers to be informed of the fellow's advent.

But if he should not chance to come alone? That was a point not to be ignored. If having located his quarry he telegraphed the news to Lincoln O'Hara and the other man in association with him, that would mean that to-morrow there would be at least three men of ruthless disposition and desperate activity to be faced, with possibly the woman, Sadie, who, if her associations did not malign her, was of predatory breed, and as a Moll of the underworld not to be ignored. Together they would make a tough handful, and with their inclination to use pistols on slight provocation would be really dangerous. But the morrow almost certainly would bring Bobby Medway, and if active trouble arose Bobby would be a tower of strength.

Something loomed out of the mist on his left, and with relief he recognized the inn. Entering, he was made at home by the proprietor, a solemn man with the taciturnity characteristic of dwellers in isolated places. The man provided him with an old coat lined with sheepskin to wear whilst his own coats were dried, and he sat in front of the fire in the big kitchen, toasting his legs, and reflecting on the events of the day until supper-time, when a dish of eggs and bacon, with potatoes browned to a nicety, was provided.

Being hungry, he ate heartily, drank a pint of bottled ale, and about ten o'clock, when his host began to yawn and indicate in other ways that it was the usual time for the household to retire, he took his candle. His host, no doubt guessing that for him the hour was early, grunted an apologetic explanation.

"Be market-day to Dulverton to-morrow! Us have got to be stirring come cockcrow."

Melcombe laughed his understanding, and, warm as a toast, took his way to bed. There were curtains at the window, but he did not trouble to draw them. Sliding one half the window back, he looked forth into the night. There was nothing whatever to be seen except a little cloud of mist lit by the dim light of the candle, and nothing to be heard but the drip of moisture from the eaves. A phrase from a great Victorian poet occurred to him as he stood there—"All in a death-dumb, autumn-dripping gloom." The description seemed apt enough, for the gloom was profound and the dripping the one thing audible. Little fear, he thought, of any callers at The Stag in such weather, and, assured of a quiet night, prepared himself for retiring.

Lying in bed, with the candle on a chair, he smoked a couple of cigarettes, reflecting on what he would do on the morrow; then feeling himself growing drowsy, he blew out the candle and composed himself for sleep. In a very little time he was in a sound slumber, which, however, was later disturbed by dreams, in which visions of a girl's face beautiful and troubled came and

went. Presently the dream changed. He was in a strange house a-bed with some man hammering down the floor-boards. The fact was a little unusual, he thought, but thinking the fellow would finish presently, he clung to the sheets, curbing his resentment of the fellow who had not the sense to understand that he wanted to sleep. The workman, however, hammered on. Melcombe's resentment grew, and at last, moved to exasperation by some extra loud effort of the industrious one, he lifted himself up in bed to curse the fellow. At that precise moment he awoke, to find that the hammering heard through his dreams was real enough, but was not in his room. He lifted himself on his elbow to locate the sound, and a fraction of a minute later realized the truth. The hammering was not in the house at all; it was outside, where, as he judged, someone was using a stone on the heavy door panels in an effort to wake the landlord.

It was not his affair to answer the door, but it was very much his desire to learn who the caller was; and leaving the bed, he slipped to the window. The hammering continued, and under cover of the din of it he slid back the window and cautiously put forth his head.

The night was dark as the pit. He could see nothing, but presently he heard a voice raised in exasperation that was very natural.

"Oh, hell!"

At the sound he stiffened. The words explosively uttered were brief enough; but he knew that he had heard that voice before, at a

time when, as now, the speaker was unseen, in the drive at Dartleigh House.

"Brother Sacco—for a shilling!"

The caller renewed his hammering, which presently broke through the heavy slumber of the landlord; for down the passage there was the sound of a creaking door, followed by that of shuffling feet. He listened carefully, heard the feet go down the stairs, the sound of a heavy lock turning, and then that of a lifted latch. Craning out of the window and staring in the direction of the door, he saw a very faint lightening of the Stygian gloom, then caught the landlord's voice.

"Who be ee—disturbin' volk in their sleep?"

"A traveller lost in this dam' fog," answered the caller. "I want a lodging for the night. Any sort of shakedown will do."

"Ee're a tramping fellow, maybe?" asked the landlord sharply.

"Golly! No. What sort of a guy do you take me for? If money's the trouble, there you are, man."

Apparently the innkeeper was satisfied by the evidence produced, for he spoke in mollified tones.

"A room an' a bed ee can have, but no victuals till breakfast-time. I won't have the wife dragged out of bed at this hour—not for the King hisself."

"A model Benedict!" The other laughed. "But the room an' the bed are all I need till breakfast-time."

"All right. Then step in, but step quiet. I've another caller in the house a-bed these

three hours; an' there's no call to break his beauty sleep."

There followed the closing of the door and a little while later the sound of the two pair of feet ascending the stairs. Melcombe closed the window and moved quietly to the door, where he stood listening.

"Here be the chamber," he heard the innkeeper say. "An' ee can have this candle; but move quietly or ee'll disturb the gentleman next door."

"Don't worry over that, I won't wake him. Who is he? A regular client?"

"No. Came along this avternoon with a young lady, who is gone on to Shapgate."

"Shapgate. I've heard the name somewhere. Swagger sort of place, isn't it?"

"Town-bred volk would call it wisht," answered the innkeeper. "But there, be a matter of taste. . . . Good night to ee. Breakfast be at eight."

"Good night, landlord."

A door closed rather noisily; a second door creaked, but, unless Melcombe's ears told him wrongly, was not latched; and a minute or two later there were sounds of movement in the next room, as if the occupant of it were preparing for bed. Quite distinctly he caught the noise made by boots dropped on the floor, and decided that they had been discarded too soon since the man would scarcely have reached that stage of undressing yet, unless he had begun at the wrong end. A second or so later, he heard the creaking of a wire mattress, and interpreted it silently.

"Fellow has sat down. Can't possibly be ready for the sheets yet."

He crept back to the chair by the bedside and groped for the matches and candle. Then he changed his mind, and set the matches down again. So still was the old place that the sound of a match on the box might possibly be heard by the man in the next room. There was a petrol lighter in his waistcoat pocket, which could be operated almost in silence, and groping for that, he used it, and with the candle lighted proceeded to dress; for a man undressed was at a disadvantage if it came to a struggle, as it very well might.

He had no doubt whatever that some time before morning Sacco would pay him a call, and that the call so far as the Italian was concerned would be a secret one.

No doubt the fellow knew all about the envelope which Lincoln O'Hara was so anxious to recover, and would almost certainly make an attempt to learn if it were still in his possession. It might, perhaps, be as well to put it in some safer hiding-place than the one where it was at present concealed, since if any mischance should overtake himself, his clothes would no doubt be thoroughly searched. He looked round for any possible hiding-place, and his eyes fell on an ancient chest of drawers.

"There!"

He slipped out of bed and gently tried the two short drawers at the top. One of them was locked; but the other, made by some conscientious craftsman of long ago, slid open as quietly

as if it had run on ball-bearings. It was empty save for a piece of newspaper cut to fit the bottom ; and sliding it out the whole length, he turned it over. There was a space between the runners and the bottom of the drawer of at least a third of an inch, which if he could avail himself of it would prove a perfect hiding-place against anyone making a hasty search. He thought for a moment, then a complete look of satisfaction came on his face. In his wallet was a small square envelope, holding a patent plaister which he had purchased some time before, when he had suffered a nasty abrasion whilst operating with the starting-handle of his car, and which would serve his present purpose very well.

He carried the drawer to the bed, turned it upside-down, found the plaister which was in strips an inch and a half long, then, using his penknife, he ripped an opening in the back lining of his waistcoat and extracted the envelope from its place of concealment which he had devised in the morning.

Two or three minutes sufficed to stick it to the bottom of the drawer ; and after assuring himself that it held by turning the drawer right way up, he restored the drawer to its place. He closed it and reopened it once or twice to make sure that the envelope did not in any way obstruct the action of the drawer, then closed it finally.

After due consideration, partly clothed, he quietly crept into bed again, and extinguished the candle.

How long would Sacco wait before taking action? Some time, he thought, for the scoundrel would certainly desire the innkeeper to be sound asleep before he left his room. And when he came? Melcombe decided that as the man would almost certainly be armed, it would be as well to pretend slumber and allow the fellow to make any search uninterrupted so long as there was no risk of his finding the envelope. He would almost certainly discover that rip in the waistcoat lining, and would no doubt draw the conclusion that the envelope had reposed there; but that could not be helped.

He fell to wondering how the scoundrel had found his way so quickly to the inn. Could he possibly have known Madeline Westley's real destination? From the girl's own account of the precautions taken to secure secrecy in regard to the tenancy of Shapgate, that seemed impossible, and the fellow had not had time to return to Bristol and trace the movements of the girl and himself after the flight from the train. For a long time he was utterly puzzled until he remembered the Daimler and its driver. There was perhaps one chance in a thousand that Sacco and the driver had met —say at Dunster, and that the Italian had gathered the information he needed from the one man who was able to supply it, and who was unaware of any need for secrecy. At any rate, he could think of nothing that would account for the man's early arrival save that thousandth chance, and he was forced to leave

the matter there. The important thing was that Sacco was here, in ample time to——

A slight sound of movement in the next room interrupted his reflections. Instantly he grew alert. There was another sound, that of a loose board, which was followed by a period of silence. He laughed softly to himself as he visioned the Italian, waiting, heart in mouth, to learn if the noise had been noticed; then after an interval there was a creaking as of the opening of the door that had been left ajar.

For a little time, strain as he would, he heard nothing more, and the next evidence that Sacco had really left his room was afforded by a faint glimmer of light under the door. The fellow, he thought, must have moved silently as a cat, but, unlike the latter, could not see in the dark and had brought his candle or a flashlight with him. Then the glimmer went out suddenly.

"Flashlight!" Melcombe's mind registered silently. A hand pawed the door. Very gently the latch was lifted, and the door must have opened without a creak, for though Melcombe could see nothing, he had a sense of the other's presence in the room.

There was a little pause, as if the intruder were listening to assure himself that his entry had not been noticed. For his part Melcombe lay quite still, wondering what the man would do, and thinking that as like as not he would search his clothes for the envelope, since there could be no other reason for this nocturnal call.

A little beam of light cut the darkness,

travelled round the room, flashed for a second round the bed, then was extinguished. Wondering what that forfended, Melcombe waited, alert and tense, prepared to spring out of bed and fight for his life if necessary. To make a personal attack, however, seemed to be outside Sacco's immediate programme. A board creaked very slightly, and three seconds later Melcombe knew that the man was searching his coat and vest which hung behind the door.

From the time occupied, the search must have been a very thorough one, and the man an expert at his task, in performing which only the faintest rustlings indicated his activities. Presently, however, these faint sounds ceased and there was a short period of silence. Melcombe conceived his visitor was considering his next move; and then once more the beam of light clove the utter darkness of the room, and fixed itself upon the bedpost. At that moment Melcombe came near to open laughter. Sacco was looking for the rest of his clothing, and was no doubt surprised not to find them hanging at the tail of the bed. The light shifted, flashed here and there, and finally came back to the bed.

Melcombe had no more than time to close his eyes before the beam fell on his face, dazzlingly. Sacco took a step or two forward, bringing the light nearer, and do what he would, Melcombe could not keep his eyelids from quivering. He guessed the man was watching; and five seconds later he had confirmation of that, for the light was advanced

suddenly nearer his face. The glare was too much for him. He opened his eyes, blinked, and then sat up in bed.

"Keep still!" came a hissing whisper. "Or mother's boy will step right out of the picture."

In the beam of light for one second there showed the ugly shape of an automatic pistol, then was withdrawn; whilst the light continued to flash dazzlingly in Melcombe's eyes. He found the glare uncomfortable, and entered a mild protest.

"Do you mind moving the light a little, Mr. Sacco? You see, I treasure my eyesight."

A sharp oath broke from the intruder. No doubt he was surprised to find that the man he threatened was aware of his identity, but Melcombe did not mind that and continued in a whisper: "There's a candle on the chair there, and matches. I prefer candlelight to that firework in your hand—better for the eyes, you know. With your permission I will light it. That will be more convenient for us both, you know."

For two seconds the light shifted, rested on the candlestick, and then flashed back to Melcombe's face.

"Yeh!" came the whisper. "But put your two hands outa bed first—empty. No tricks or I'll put a hole in yah."

Melcombe obliged by turning sideways and extending both hands towards the chair, where the flashlight picked them out instantly.

"O.K.?" he asked.

"Yeh!"

He struck a match and lit the candle, and as he did so, Sacco whispered again peremptorily:

"Lean back an' grip the bedrail with your paws. Don't yah dare to leave go till I tell yah."

Melcombe leaned back and grasped the bedrail as directed, then looked at the other smilingly.

"New form of 'hands-up!' hey? But the precaution is quite unnecessary, I assure you, Mr. Sacco. I am not—er—heeled, to use the language of your native west."

"Stow the gabb!" whispered the other fiercely, and then his dark eyes flashed round the room, plainly searching for something.

Melcombe, understanding, was moved to open laughter.

"Where are they?" demanded the Italian harshly.

"I am wearing them," chuckled Melcombe. "You see, the night is cold and I have a horror of damp beds. These wayside innkeepers are so careless, and as rheumatoid arthritis is hereditary in my——"

"Stop the joshing!" broke in Sacco. "Get out of the hay an' don't try any hanky-panky or——"

He made a gesture with the pistol to round off the threat, and Melcombe, throwing off the bedclothes, stepped out of bed.

"Strip!" demanded the visitor. "An' toss yah duds over there."

He indicated the open space near the door, and Melcombe obeyed his orders smilingly.

"Now walk to thet corner, an' stir if yah dare."

"Mind if I take the quilt with me?" asked Melcombe. "I don't want to get a chill. This damp air, you know, is cold."

He did not wait for permission, but, taking the quilt, wrapped it round him, noting as he did so a flash in Sacco's eyes that was one of complete misunderstanding and which boded ill for the quilt. Then smiling to himself, he walked to the corner which the other had indicated, and watched the fellow whilst he made a close search of the discarded underclothing and nether-garments. Drawing a blank there, Sacco next gave his attention to the bed, which he stripped to the bare iron, examining all the component parts of it—sheets, blankets, pillows and mattress—with a thoroughness that won Melcombe's admiration. That task finished, he spoke viciously:

"Throw that quilt, here."

For a second Melcombe was tempted to do more than obey. If throwing the quilt he could manage to entangle the fellow in its folds, it might be possible to overpower him, and turn the tables on him. The project was tempting but risky, and deciding it was not worth while, he tossed the padded quilt to the ruffian's feet.

The fellow spread it wide upon the floor, and went over it carefully with his stockinged feet. Finding nothing suspicious by that means, he dropped on his knees, and still holding the pistol with one hand with the other felt every

inch of the quilt, and then taking out his flash-light he examined all the seams in a way that, as Melcombe thought, would have done credit to a customs officer. Rising, he kicked the quilt aside, and glared savagely round—a much chagrined man. His eyes rested on the chest of drawers, and as he moved towards it, Melcombe put in a plea:

"Mind if I have the quilt again, Mr. Sacco? I'm shivering."

"You can shiver yahself to perdition!" grunted the other ferociously.

"But I won't! . . . You can shoot if you like. I'm going to have that quilt or a blanket, and it really isn't worth while letting off that pistol of yours to stop me. You'll waken the household if you do, you know."

Quite deliberately he left his corner, and whilst the other watched him closely, he retrieved the quilt and rewrapped himself in it.

"Get back!" spat the other.

He got back, and with some anxiety watched the ruffian attack the chest of drawers. The very first drawer he opened was the empty one beneath which the envelope was concealed. Melcombe held his breath. If the plaister gave way or the fellow pulled out and turned over the drawer, he must inevitably discover the thing he was seeking. A couple of seconds later he drew his breath easily again. Sacco, seeing an empty drawer after lifting the paper on the bottom, thrust it back in place. Then he tried the next drawer, found it locked, and swung round towards Melcombe.

"Where's the key?"

"I'm afraid you'll have to ask the innkeeper that. You see, I arrived without luggage, and so had no use for that chest."

Sacco whispered a curse, and taking from his pocket a knife which appeared to have something special in the way of outfit, began to operate on the lock. Inside three minutes there was a click, and he wrenched the drawer open. Then another oath broke from him. He stared for a second or two at the contents, which were quite invisible to Melcombe, and closed the drawer abruptly. Melcombe watching him had a side wonder as to what the drawer held, and scarcely followed the other's actions as he opened the remaining drawers, which were apparently empty. As he finished his examination the Italian stared round again with a baffled look on his face. There were few places of concealment in the bare room, and apparently he was in doubt what to do next. Then quite suddenly he stiffened like a pointer dog, his eyes, as Melcombe saw, fixed on the waistcoat hanging behind the door which he had examined in the dark. Melcombe could see quite plainly the opened seam of the inner lining where the envelope had been hidden, and knew that the Italian must have divined the meaning of it. A second later complete proof was afforded him. Whirling on his heel, Sacco hurried across the room and jabbed the automatic between the folds of the quilt, so that Melcombe felt the muzzle of it cold upon his flesh.

"Where is it?" he demanded in a sharp whisper.

"If I knew what you were talking about——"

"Cut the flip-flop. Yah know right enough. Where's the darn envelope yah stole from that fool Linky's coat. Yah've had it—sewed up in that vest. Where——"

"Oh, that! My dear fellow, if I'd known you were looking for that I could have saved you oceans of trouble. You see——"

"Where is it, yah saphead?"

"Really, Mr. Sacco, I must protest. I am not accustomed to being addressed——"

A sharp jab of the pistol just beneath the breast-bone jerked the breath out of him, and the other snarled.

"Spit it out! Yah got it, right enough. Tell me or, by Gosh, I'll make a stiff of yah."

Melcombe did not believe the man would fire, and deliberately delayed his answer as if making a calculation. Then he lied cheerfully.

"Well, since you're so interested, having in view the time the mail leaves Bristol, I should say the envelope was now well on its way to the G.P.O., London."

"Yah mailed it?" asked the other ferociously.

"To Mr. Horace G. Westley, c/o of The American Embassy, Prince's Gate, S.W."

"Curse yah! I don't b'lieve yah. Yah're lying!"

"Well, in that case, I don't know how to convince you."

A look of cunning came on the other's face, and there was a sudden flash in the dark eyes which proclaimed the impact of a new idea. Melcombe noted both and wondered what the idea was. A moment later he had a suspicion of its nature. Sacco backed a yard, removing the automatic from contact with Melcombe's chest, then he grinned.

"Slick guy, ain't yah? Think I fall for a dime yarn like that, hey? Guess I know where them documents are planted; an' I'm going to get 'em yet, never fear."

He backed towards the door, and slipped outside, closing it carefully behind him. Scarcely had he gone when a suspicion of the truth leaped into Melcombe's mind, and hurrying to his clothes he began to dress more rapidly than he had ever done in his life. Before he had finished a sound which came from the lower part of the house sent him hurriedly to the window. With infinite care he opened it, and, with his head craned out, listened. Below the outer door opened and closed, and he heard cautious steps on the stony road. He could see nothing; the fog made it difficult to tell in what direction the man was going; but in his heart he knew, and he wasted no further time in listening.

He finished dressing in record time, all except his shoes, then with a thought of retrieving the envelope he took the candle and moved towards the chest. With his hand on the knob of the drawer beneath which was the hiding-place, he paused. Why remove the envelope?

It was safer there than it would be if he carried it about with him. Almost as the thought occurred to him he made the decision to leave it, and was turning away when he remembered the other drawer the lock of which Sacco had picked, and which he had closed so abruptly. He was in a hurry, but curiosity to know what it contained was strong within him, and he spared a moment to gratify it. Opening the drawer half-way, he looked in. He saw a child's bonnet, a pair of small shoes, a faded daguerreotype of a girl child, and a lock of very light hair tied with a piece of white ribbon—relics, as he guessed, of some lost child of the household. Almost as abruptly as Sacco himself he closed the drawer, and turned to pick up his shoes.

As he did so the disarray of the room with the bedclothes thrown hither and thither struck him forcibly. But he had no time to spare to put it right. Yet something must be done in case he should not return before it was entered by some member of the household. Hurriedly he took out a pocket-book, and rapidly scrawled a note:

> "Reserve room till I return. Here is the rent beforehand. Will explain disorder on return."

This, with two pound notes, he set on the wire mattress of the bed; then with his shoes in one hand and the candle in the other, he left the room and crept downstairs. The outer door, as he saw at a glance, stood on the latch;

and after donning his shoes, he lifted the latch, opened the door, blew out the now guttering candle, set it on the floor and passed outside, softly closing the door behind him. In the Stygian darkness he stood listening. No sound reached him from within ; and without, nothing but that made by dripping moisture. He could see absolutely nothing. To venture forth on the open moor on such a night was the acme of folly. But Sacco had taken the risk, and since almost certainly the scoundrel was making for Shapgate, he knew that he must follow. With his back to the inn, he did a right turn, and with his face in the direction of Shapgate, began to move forward carefully and slowly, assuring himself at each step that he was still on the metalled road.

CHAPTER X

A SHOT IN THE NIGHT

IT was infinitely more difficult walking through the heavy mist in darkness than it had been by daylight. On his return from Shapgate he had been able to see the brownish road at his feet quite clearly, now he could see absolutely nothing. He felt like a man walking in some immense pit. The blackness of the world was almost eerie; the mist set cold fingers on his face, and presently, with its dampness, chilled him to the marrow. He dared not hurry even to warm himself; for with nothing but the roughness of the road underfoot to guide him, it would be easy to go astray, and to step even a couple of yards off the road was to run a serious risk of not finding it again until the mist lifted.

More than once he found himself with one foot on the grass and one on the road. On each occasion he drew back cautiously, taking infinite care to keep his direction; and even so, after one of these steps aside found himself walking uphill when he should have been descending, and by that solitary fact realized that in his withdrawal from the grass he had turned completely round. By moving to the

side of the road, feeling the bents with his left foot, and pivoting on his heel, and then finding the bents on his right, he regained his direction; and, as he moved forward once more, wondered how the scoundrelly Sacco was faring.

The Italian, he assured himself, must be having even a worse time. It was most unlikely that the fellow could have any acquaintance with the road on that side of the inn, and though probably he had a description of Shapgate, and knew the kind of house to look for, in the mist and darkness that would be of no more use than it would be to a blind man.

Now and again he stopped to listen, hoping to hear the man who he conceived to be ahead of him. On each occasion the ghostly silence remained unbroken, and he found in that fact cause for apprehension. If Sacco had not missed the road he must be well ahead, and that possibility was not a consoling one, in view of the further possibility of his reaching Shapgate without Madeline Westley being warned of his presence in the neighbourhood.

Profoundly disturbed by the thought of the contingencies of the situation, he made what speed he dared, and after a time found himself assailed by a new anxiety. How was he to know when he had arrived at his destination? It would be easy to pass Shapgate without being aware of the fact, and once past it he might continue and lose himself completely in the utter blackness of the misty night. That consideration made him slacken his pace, and keep as well as he could to the left of the road,

in the hope that by that means he might find the wall which surrounded the house. He had, however, better luck than he had hoped for. Just when he was beginning to fear that he must have passed the house, the stillness was broken by the rattle of a chain. He stopped to listen. Again the sound came and on the heels of it followed the lowing of a cow. His heart leaped at the sound. Somewhere quite near at hand were cattle chained in the byre. There was no other house in the neighbourhood; if the innkeeper's description in the afternoon had been correct, that lowing and the rattling chain for him meant one thing. "Shapgate!" he whispered exultantly.

Cautiously, and moving as silently as possible, he veered slightly to the left, since on that side the house stood; and presently his outstretched hand encountered a wall. Very carefully he felt his way along it, and after a little time found what was unquestionably a gate-post, with the gate, as further groping assured him, standing wide to the world. That simple fact gave him food for thought. Had Sacco found his way to Shapgate after all, and left open this gate, which he himself had seen closed, in order to facilitate a possibly hurried retreat?

He did not think it likely; but the contingency had to be reckoned with, and as he turned into the gate, he felt for the lawn, which he knew to be in front of the house, and with the grass underfoot moved forward anew. Presently he stepped on gravel, and carefully negotiating that, found the house—with his

hands. Further search brought him to the two broad steps which led to the front door, and there he paused, listening, and considering what course to pursue.

No sound broke the utter stillness, even the cattle in the neighbouring stalls were still. No slight glow in the mist proclaimed a light in the house. The whole place was still and dark as the grave. If Sacco were in the neighbourhood, so far, at any rate, he had not declared his presence. He debated whether it would not be better to refrain from further action until the morning; merely mounting guard, and watching for the Italian's arrival. But the thought of spending the night in the open, chilled to the bone by the cold mist, keeping a vigil that would mean standing still most of the time, did not appeal to him; and further, it seemed essential that Madeline Westley should be warned of Sacco's presence in the neighbourhood without delay. The latter consideration weighed as much in the making of his decision as the former, and without wasting further time, he began to grope for the bell. It was a little time before he found it—one of the old-fashioned kind, with a knob to be pulled. He tugged it, without result; except a rasping of wire. He tried again, with a like result, and judging from the slackness of the connection that the bell must be out of action, he sought for some other means of awakening the household. There was no knocker; but a little groping about the border which ran up to the side of the steps rewarded him with

a stone, with which he proceeded to hammer on the oaken door, hoping fervently that the sound would not guide the Italian that way.

In a little time his efforts were rewarded. A faint lifting of the darkness above his head proclaimed a lamp or candle shining through the fan-light, and a moment later he caught the sound of heavy steps within.

Bolts were drawn, a chain rattled, a lock was turned and then the door opened, revealing the man who had been herding the sheep along the road in the afternoon. The man lifted the lamp and stared at him with distinct hostility, which, thought Melcombe, was not to be wondered at.

"What be ee wanting?" he demanded grumpily.

"I want to see Miss Martin, at once," answered Melcombe.

"Be no time vor visitors," retorted the man. "The young lady have been a-bed vor hours."

"Of course," answered Melcombe. "I can guess that. But I am a friend of hers, and you really must awaken her and tell her Mr. Melcombe is here. It is most important."

"How be I to know that?" asked the man doubtfully.

"Well," replied Melcombe, a little peremptorily. "You've just got to take my word for it. But you will have proof enough the moment you deliver the message, I'll warrant you."

The man did not move. His elderly face set in stubborn lines. He looked as if he were

about to shut the doors in the caller's face; and in anticipation of some such action, Melcombe deliberately set a foot against the door, whilst he broke out impatiently:

"For God's sake, hurry, man! Tell Miss Martin that Mr. Melcombe is here, desiring to speak with her. She will know without you telling her that the matter is urgent."

"What name ee zay?" asked the man slowly.

"Melcombe. Mel-combe! Just tell her that. —Ah! You're spared the trouble, my man. . . . Here comes the lady herself."

Over the man's shoulder on the broad oaken staircase he had glimpsed Madeline Westley, candlestick in hand, her dark eyes bright with wonder.

"Miss Martin," he cried, "just tell this man to admit me. I can't persuade him that my visit is a friendly one, and my business urgent."

The girl descended the remaining stairs and came forward. Her hair had a sweet disorder, her pale face was a little flushed; the wonder was still in her eyes; and in the kimono of black and gold which she wore, to Melcombe's eyes she was the fairest picture he had ever seen.

"It is all right, Mr. Snowe," she said to the grizzled guardian of the door. "Mr. Melcombe really is a friend of mine. He is the gentleman who came along with me this afternoon. Just take your lamp into the dining-room. . . . I will close the door."

"An' lock an' bolt it," said the man.

"Yes. It shall be both locked and bolted."

The man moved away and Melcombe stepped into the hall. As he did so the girl's eyes met his, and the colour in her face deepened suddenly, but she spoke with composure.

"Something has happened?"

"Yes. Sacco is already on the moor. I think he is coming here."

"But those papers?" she asked in a quick whisper. "They are safe?"

"Quite safe!"

"Thank God!" she said fervently, then moving forward closed the door, which Melcombe himself locked and bolted and chained whilst she held the candle.

The man came out into the hall as he finished the task, and Madeline Westley gave him the candle.

"There is no need for you to remain up, Mr. Snowe. I will see things safe when Mr. Melcombe goes."

The man took the candle and his departure in silence, and the girl led Melcombe into the dining-room. When the door was shut, she faced him and said abruptly:

"Tell me!"

He told her all that had happened, and she listened without interrupting to the end; then she asked quickly:

"You think that he is coming here?"

"I am morally certain of it."

"But how can he know about this house?"

Melcombe gave the only feasible explanation of the Italian's knowledge of Shapgate that he had been able to find.

"He must have met the man who brought us here from Bristol. . . . A nasty piece of ill-luck for us. But there it is. We can only hope that he will lose himself in the fog. But even then he will probably show-up when daylight comes. He did not believe my story about mailing those papers; and not having found them in my possession, has decided that you have them. I am certain of that."

"Well, he will find he is wrong."

"Yes, but——"

Melcombe broke off. Again, in imagination, he felt that cold ring of the pistol muzzle against his naked flesh; and he could not contemplate with equanimity the thought of the girl encountering such a ruffian alone.

"But—what?" she asked.

"Well. You cannot be left to deal with Sacco by yourself. The scoundrel is capable of any villainy."

"You mean——"

"I mean that I think I must stay here to watch over you, at least until your father arrives."

"You think I cannot take care of myself?" asked the girl quickly.

"I did not say that." For a second Melcombe visioned her as he had first seen her over his shoulder, pistol in hand and a look of determination on her face. Then he laughed. "Remembering how you held me up at Dartleigh, I should say you could do that very well—given even chances. But in this case the chances are not even. The house is very

isolated. Whilst the fog lasts it might be built on a desert island. You cannot leave——"

"I do not want to leave before my father arrives," came the interruption.

"No! I understand that. And if you are right, he will not arrive here for almost another twenty-four hours. This fog may last so long—perhaps longer, and with Sacco in the offing, and Shapgate cut off from the outside world, you would not be safe here alone."

"You forget! There is Snowe and his wife——"

"As useful as sheep bleating on the moor in this situation. Sacco and the men who may join him would cut their throats with no more compunction than if they were woolly-backs. You must know that, remembering Perelli."

"Yes!" whispered the girl, the colour going from her face like a swift ebb-tide. "Yes!"

"Therefore I must camp here to—er—watch over you. That much you must see."

"I can see the desirability of it—from my point of view," was the answer slowly given. "But——" She hesitated, and did not finish.

"But what, Miss Westley."

"But . . . well, I do not understand why you should take such risks for me."

Perhaps Melcombe had not wholly understood it himself until that moment. But as he met her frank eyes, he knew the truth beyond all question. The blood ran to his head. He was conscious of a wild impulse to take the girl in his arms. His eyes were alight with sudden

ardour, and as the girl's frank eyes were swiftly veiled and the colour came racing back to her face, he was shaken by passion that clamoured for utterance, but, remembering the situation, he checked it. This was not the moment for the truth that might prove infinitely disturbing, and which further might hinder her free acceptance of the service he proposed to render. He laughed a little shakily.

"Oh!" he cried. "You know the modern slogan—'live adventurously'! Here's my chance; and I would not let it go by me on the other side for a kingdom. . . . It is a green oasis in a very desert of boredom."

Madeline Westley looked at him with eyes that were bright with understanding, but she did not clothe her knowledge in words. Apparently she accepted his explanation.

"Well, it appears you will have adventure and to spare. Sacco and his friends are not likely to accept defeat. And if they should proceed to extreme action——"

"We will meet them in the gate!" he laughed back. "I wonder if there is a gun in this house?"

"There is a fowling-piece in the kitchen, over the mantelpiece. I saw it when I was looking round the house after my arrival."

"A shot-gun!" he laughed. "And cartridges, no doubt. Come," he said. "Show me the gun, and let us hunt for the cartridges."

"I might ask the caretaker——" she began tentatively.

"No! Let him sleep. If there's but one

gun, only one man can use it at a time, and I doubt if that good man would fire on an undesirable caller. He would not understand the need."

"There is my pistol," she reminded him.

"But you must keep that! We do not know what may happen." He moved to the lamp and picked it up. "Let us go to the kitchen. The sooner I have that gun in hand the better. One never knows what may happen. Sacco might take it into his head to open hostilities on his lonesome."

He moved towards the door carrying the lamp, and the girl accompanied him to the hall.

"This way!" she said, and led him to the kitchen.

There he set the lamp upon the table and took down the gun from an improvised rack above the mantelpiece. He examined it swiftly.

"Belgian! Number twelve bore. Cheap, but serviceable." Then he opened the breech. "Not loaded. Brother Snowe is a careful man. I wonder where he keeps his ammunition? Somewhere here, I haven't a doubt."

Madeline Westley looked round. There was a dresser with drawers. She opened them and searched, but did not find the cartridges. She tried a cupboard and again drew a blank cover.

"I'm afraid we shall have to waken Snowe, or wait until morning."

"No!" he laughed exultantly, moving towards a door, where a coat hung from a peg, half concealing a begrimed khaki-coloured knapsack of army pattern. "Here for a crown."

He took down the bag, and before he thrust a hand into it knew that he was right. The cartridges, eight all told, were there; and he promptly loaded both barrels of the gun, closed the breech, and turned to her with a laugh.

"'I fear no foe,'" he quoted, "not even though he be heeled with automatics. At ten yards' range the shot from this gun will begin to spread; at twenty-five, it will be as wide as that dish-cover there. Far surer than a bullet if not quite as deadly, whilst its moral influence will be greater. A man will face a bullet who would shiver at the thought of a dose of small shot. Now I think we might return to the front of the house. But, first——"

He took three other cartridges from the knapsack, bestowing them in his pocket. Then with the lamp in one hand and the loaded gun in the other he led the way back to the dining-room, where he set the lamp upon the table.

"Now——" he began, but broke off as the girl made a sharp warning sound.

"Hist!"

He froze to attention, listening with strained ears, but heard nothing. Yet he did not move. Looking at the girl, he asked in a whisper:

"What was it?"

"The noise of feet on the gravel outside!"

Melcombe heard nothing. The girl's ears, he thought, must be much quicker than his

own—or was it that her imagination was more vivid? After a little while he spoke.

"I think you must have been mistaken, Miss Westley. Perhaps something in the house moved. A rat or a mouse—behind the panelling. In the stillness——"

"No!" she interjected. "It was not that; it was—— Ah, there!"

This time Melcombe caught the sound—a little rattle of gravel on the drive outside, but not at all like the crunching noise made by moving feet. It was an odd queer sound hinting at someone or something moving secretively, and with its hint of mystery set the nerves jumping. Whilst he stood rigid, staring in the direction of the window, his mind hurriedly sought for likely explanations. A domestic fowl scratching in the gravel might have occasioned it; but what fowl would be abroad in the darkness? A prowling fox, an injured sheep dragging itself—then his mind leaped to the only really satisfactory explanation. A man crawling on hands and knees across the gravel!

With the thought, he deliberately cocked both triggers of the gun. A little startled by his action, Madeline Westley whispered a swift question.

"You think someone is coming?"

"I think it is well to be prepared—for anything!" he answered a trifle grimly. "And perhaps it would be as well if you left the room, Miss Westley."

A mutinous look came on the beautiful face,

and her lips shaped themselves to a single decisive word.

"No!"

Melcombe realized the futility of persuasion. She would remain whatever he might say; and perhaps there was no need for apprehension. Some quite simple thing might account for—— His thoughts broke off as he caught the mysterious sound again. It seemed to be nearer, almost under the window. He stared fixedly at the dark panes, and whilst he did so there befell a thing utterly startling. For one second a face outlined itself dimly against the fogged glass. He had little more than a glimpse of it, vague, and white in the lamplight, and could not guess whether it was that of a man or woman. The next second the face turned quickly towards the darkness, dropped suddenly below the level of the window-sill, and almost simultaneously there was a plopping sound, the window-pane shivered; and the lamp-shade crashed, falling with a clatter on the polished oak table.

"Lie down!" he cried to the girl in a peremptory voice, and himself sprang to the lamp. As he did so an old warning leaped to his mind. Never blow down the chimney. It was no time for niceties, however, and unaware that there was an extinguishing catch, he puffed sharply down the tube of glass. There was a spurt of blue flame, then the lamp went out; and as he stood there, through the utter darkness he heard Madeline Westley's whisper:

"What was it?"

"A bullet!" he answered laconically.

"But . . . there was no report!"

"No. The pistol that fired it has a silencer on it."

"You think the bullet was fired at us?"

"No! At the person at the window. . . . You saw——"

"Yes! Yes!"

"Someone else saw also, someone who bore a grudge against that one who looked in. That shot was meant to kill. The breaking of the window and the lamp-shade was just an accident."

"Then there are two people out there?"

"Must be. . . . Don't you think you had better go to your room, Miss Westley?"

"I am going," she retorted, "for my bag."

He heard her moving towards the door; remembered that the bag held the pistol which he had counselled her to keep there; and as the door opened he laughed softly to himself in appreciation of her spirit. Then in the utter blackness of the room, soft-footed as a cat, he moved towards the broken window, hoping to get some inkling of the mystery hidden in the fog and darkness outside.

CHAPTER XI

MYSTERY

HE could see nothing, and no sound betrayed the fact that outside there were at least two people, one of whom peeping in at the window had been shot at by the other. Hidden by the darkness, he crept quite close to the broken pane, the better to listen. Only the faint drip of moisture from a neighbouring tree made itself audible, but for that the garden was quiet as a graveyard at midnight.

He continued his vigil, whilst his mind searched for an explanation of the mystery. That there were two men outside was clear; that both were interested in Shapgate or in those whom it sheltered appeared to be unchallengeable, whilst it was quite certain that they were not acting in concert. The attempt on the life of the man who had been at the window put that beyond all doubt. But who were they? One of them might very well be Sacco. But who was the other?

He could find no answer to that question, and was still seeking one when he heard Madeline Westley enter the room. She was quite invisible, as he must have been to her; for a second later he heard her whisper softly:

"Are you there, Mr. Melcombe?"

"Yes," he answered, and moved a little away from the window lest any eavesdropper should overhear. Then her whisper sounded again:

"Did you recognize the man at the window?"

"No!"

"Do you think it was Sacco?"

"It may have been! One of the two was almost certainly he. There can't be so many persons abroad at this hour. Exmoor isn't Piccadilly."

"No," answered the girl, and was silent for a little while. Then she began again, slowly, and in the hesitating way of one who is not quite sure: "Do you know . . . upstairs. . . . I had an idea——"

The whisper trailed off into silence, and Melcombe spoke encouragingly. "Yes, Miss Westley?"

"I had an idea that perhaps one of the two . . . was . . . might be my father."

"Great Harry!" cried Melcombe, in a startled whisper. "That is a possibility of course. But I understood he was not to arrive until to-morrow night."

"Something may have occurred to alter his plans."

"Ye-s-s!" admitted Melcombe slowly. "But in that case he would surely have made straight for the door."

"Perhaps he saw the light and decided to investigate first. . . . The fact that he has enemies makes him cautious, you know."

"I can understand that," he answered quietly, and to himself thought that there were many things in relation to Horace G. Westley that were beyond comprehension.

There followed a little silence during which Melcombe listened keenly for any sound outside; then the girl spoke again tentatively.

"Do you think we ought to open the door? . . . I mean, in order to find out if my father is out there——"

"No," he answered in a peremptory voice. "Certainly not. It would be folly. We should be much more likely to find a bullet. Mr. Westley will surely knock if he is there, or in some other way make his presence known."

Scarcely had the words passed his lips when the thing happened. On the outer door there was a sudden, soft tapping, which with its unexpectedness startled the girl into a whispered cry:

"Oh! There, Mr. Melcombe! You heard?"

"Yes!" he answered, himself too startled to add anything else for the moment.

"It is——" she whispered hurriedly. "It must be. We must open the door at once. It must have been he who was at the window—and Sacco who fired the shot at him."

Melcombe thought the assumption was a very large one, but did not say so. The tapping ceased for a moment, and in the interval before it was renewed he tried to think out some course of action. There seemed nothing for it but to answer the door; and yet there was a

large element of folly in such a course. He had not made up his mind what to do when the tapping was renewed, and almost in the same second he heard Madeline Westley move.

"I am going——"

"No, Miss Westley!" he cried warningly. "Wait! We must make sure before——"

He did not finish the remark. Sounds told him that she had left the room, and he started hurriedly to follow her. He had only a vague idea of the whereabouts of the door, and in the utter darkness he collided heavily with the table. He reeled back, and as he did so, heard the first bolt of the outer door shot back from the socket. There was no time to be wasted, and it was not a moment to take risks. Groping in his pocket, he found a match-box, took from it a vesta and struck it deliberately. By the aid of its tiny flame he saw his way to the door and passed out into the hall. Dimly by the outer door he glimpsed the girl, her hand on the key.

She half turned, looking at him over her shoulder. So much he saw, then the match burned low, scorching his fingers. He dropped it and ran through the darkness in the direction of the door. Almost he blundered into her, and before he could speak she whispered distraughtly:

"I must! Oh, I must!"

He knew that it was folly; but recognized that the chance must be taken, that indeed nothing short of force would prevent her from opening the door. The tapping at that moment

was renewed, and hurriedly he whispered to her:

"When you open the door stand well back. Give me a clear view, and be prepared to fling the door to if the man there is not your father. Do you understand?"

"Yes!" she whispered back, and on the instant turned the key.

The door was still held by a solitary catch, and swiftly and silently, before she slipped it back, Melcombe took up his position against the wall, groped for his matches with one hand, whilst he held the gun with the other. It was his intention to strike a match the moment the door opened in order to see the caller's face; but he never did so, for as the girl opened the door, through the mist that swirled in came the beam of a flash-light, and for a second he glimpsed Madeline Westley's face, white, tense and expectant.

"Good morning, Miss Westley. I've a message from——"

Sacco's voice! He recognized it instantly, and acted promptly.

"Shut the door, Miss Westley!"

The girl appeared to hesitate, and in the second's delay the beam of the flash-light travelled from her white face to his own, dazzling his eyes, and then he heard the Italian's voice ejaculate in surprise:

"Hell! . . . You! . . . Well——"

There was a swift movement on the part of the unseen speaker—Melcombe heard it without seeing—and a pistol with a curious covering

at the muzzle flashed into view. But as it did so he himself acted and, lifting the gun, jabbed swiftly at the unseen man with the butt. The blow was a lucky one. It caught the fellow it was meant for squarely in the chest, knocking him backward. Before the Italian could recover himself and act, the girl, realizing the truth, was closing the door. Melcombe had no more than time to leap aside, then the catch caught, the key was turned, and he heard her fumbling for the bolt.

"Bravo, Miss Westley!" he whispered, and laughed as he caught the sound of a curse from the other side of the oak.

The bolt shot into place, and he heard the girl gasping for breath. A sound very like a sob followed, and divining how intense must be her disappointment, he spoke consolingly.

"Don't worry, Miss Westley. Your father is not due yet, remember. And we took that trick fairly. Sacco got a surprise."

The girl sobbed again. "It was foolish of me! He might have killed you. . . . I saw the pistol."

"So did I!" he laughed softly. "A grim sort of thing. But there was no harm done—except to Sacco. And we know he is there, now, for one, which is so much gained." He heard her move in the darkness, as if to leave the door. She blundered into him, and as with one hand he thrust the gun away his arm instinctively closed round her to steady her, and in the same moment her hands clutched him.

He could not see her, but he visioned the white face, was intensely aware of her sweetness, and the touch of her clinging hands kindled him as her eyes had done twenty minutes before. This time his surging passion broke bounds.

"My dear!" he whispered as his clasp tightened. "My dear!" and then was appalled at the enormity of his presumption.

But the girl made no attempt to release herself. He heard the sound of another sob, and it seemed that she was compliant, but she did not speak.

"You must forgive me," he whispered. "I . . . I did not mean to take advantage of . . . of an accidental situation. If I have offended . . . But you—know! You must know. . . . In the room there—when you asked me why I took risks for you——"

He felt her move, a gurgle between a sob and laughter broke from her, then clear low laughter.

"Would you call this . . . living adventurously?"

Her whisper and laughter reassured him.

"The flood tide of it," he answered back, with fervent conviction, and drew her closer.

"But the ebb——"

"There will be no ebb! You believe that, you must. I love you—there! The whole truth is out. And there's no more to be said: except what you can say for my happiness."

"I owe you so much——" she began whisperingly.

"Oh!" he broke in. "I'm not collecting debts of gratitude. Do you love me? That's crude enough for a straight answer."

Madeline Westley laughed again softly.

"Should I be standing so, listening, if——"

The cocked gun in his hand worried him. In the blackness he could not see where to dispose of it, and so perforce held on to it; but his arm about her tightened, and he found her lips in spite of the darkness. They stood so for a very little while, then the girl brought both herself and him back to earth.

"That was Sacco—you said."

"Yes! I recognized his voice."

"Then who was the other? . . . There were two—the one who was at the window and the one who fired the shot."

"I don't know! It has me fairly gravelled."

"Do you think it was Sacco who was at the window?"

"I can't tell, but I fancy not."

"Then in that case it was Sacco who fired the pistol?"

"Must have been. And it seems certain that he knew the fellow at the window. He would scarcely try to pot a complete stranger."

A possible explanation occurred to him, suddenly. The watcher might have been Lincoln O'Hara, who breaking the compact he had apparently been forced into by Monaci and Sacco, had again begun to play a lone hand. But the objection to that was that O'Hara could scarcely have shown up on Exmoor so soon unless he had possessed previous knowledge

of Madeline Westley's destination. He felt the girl shiver under his arm.

"Cold?" he asked quickly.

"No! Afraid—for my father."

"Don't worry, my dear," he said consolingly. "There are hours before he arrives. And daylight will simplify matters and put a different face on them. We can get help—and, anyhow, those papers are safe, you know."

"Yes, thanks to you! What would have happened if you had not chanced to be at Dartleigh, I don't know."

Melcombe laughed. "Nor do we know what is to happen yet. But one thing that has happened is the best ever!"

"You are sure?"

"Surer than of anything else in the world, sweetheart. . . . But I will prove that to you later, to-morrow, and the day after, and always. Kiss me—and go to your room if you can find the way in the dark. I fancy any light just now will be unhealthy."

"But you?" she whispered.

"Sentry-go! There's nothing else for it. I have already seen Sacco pick one lock to-night; and it is possible he may try his skill again."

"I might waken Snowe."

"No! We shall have to tell him something in the morning, but I can manage this guard duty alone, till daylight."

"My pistol," she suggested. "It might be useful."

"Better keep it by you. The shot-gun will be quite effective."

"Perhaps——" She broke off and a little perplexed laugh came from her. "Here's a foolish thing! I haven't got it. I must have dropped my bag when I ran for the door."

"Never mind! We will find it. Stand by whilst I strike a match. That won't be seen behind the door."

Releasing her, he struck the match and held it up, being not greatly concerned for the bag at the moment. He saw her beautiful face, bright with unaccustomed colour, her eyes full of shy laughter, a hint of white beauty revealed by the disarray of her kimono, and he was greatly moved.

"My dear," he whispered. "You are the most beautiful——"

"We are looking for my bag," she broke in with a laughing whisper. "And there is no time for everything. Ah, there!"

She moved quickly up the hall just as the short vesta burned itself out. "I can't see——"

"Wait!" He struck another match, and as she stooped to retrieve the bag, caught a faint sound behind him in the neighbourhood of the door. In the dim light he could not see what had caused it; then there was a little rasping sound, and something moved right in the middle of the door.

"My God! Look out! The letter slit." He dropped the match as he cried the words, and even as he did so there was a subdued explosion at the door, a little flash which illumined the hall with yellow light, and the phut of a bullet as it struck a stair.

"Oh!" whispered Madeline Westley; then anxiously, "You are not hurt?"

"No. Keep against the wall."

Silently he groped his way to her, and as he found her, he explained: "Sacco in action. We shall have to be careful. Better go to your room at once. Do not light lamp or candle."

"I shall not sleep a wink for thinking of you," she whispered. "If you should be hurt."

"I shan't be. Sacco is much more likely to suffer an accident if he continues hostilities. Go, my dear. As quietly as you can. The scoundrel may fire again if he hears any sound of movement in the hall."

He scarcely heard her as she moved away, but a creak in the stairs told him that she was making the ascent, and a little time after he caught the sound of a door softly closed.

"Now," he whispered to himself. "The decks are clear. Thank heaven! Justifiable homicide is still a citizen's privilege."

Assured that, despite the Italian's lock-picking proclivities, the outer door with its bolts was quite safe, he felt his way to the room with the broken window. It was possible that Sacco might make an attempt there, and it was desirable to be on the watch. He did not enter the room, but with the door thrust open stood in the shadow of it, listening, waiting.

Quite an appreciable time passed without anything happening, then he thought there was a faint stirring of the gravel outside. He heard nothing more, but perhaps three minutes

later a disc of light was suddenly reflected by the glass of a picture, and peeping through the chink between the door and the jamb, he saw the thin beam cutting across the room from the broken window, revealing the mist which had drifted into the room. The disc passed on from the picture, and the searching ray appeared to be moving round the room. Plainly Sacco was spying out the land.

For a moment Melcombe was strongly tempted to move round the door and hazard a shot at the ruffian, but on reflection remained where he was, not being quite sure how far he would be justified in firing at a man who was not himself in the act of attacking. He hoped that the Italian would attempt an entry, and waited expectantly, assured that once the man started to enter his own opportunity would come. He would shoot to cripple the fellow, and trust to the evidence of the pistol the other carried and the pistol bullets lodged somewhere in this room and on the stairs for his justification.

But as it chanced the opportunity was denied him. The wandering light was suddenly switched off, and to his straining ears came the sound of cautious feet moving away from the window. Evidently Sacco did not mean to try an entry that way; or at any rate did not mean to make it immediately. But he might try some other point and one that would serve him better than that mullioned window from which he would have to smash the glass, which he could scarcely hope to do without

announcing his enterprise to anyone within. Melcombe thought rapidly. He himself knew nothing about the house and its possibilities and vulnerable points. The sooner he started on a tour of inspection the better, but he needed a light for that purpose, and knew of no means for obtaining one except the lamp standing on the table in the dining-room.

Setting the gun down in the corner by the doorway, he groped his way to the table, secured the lamp and, carrying it out to the hall, there lit it; and after securing the gun, closed the door of the room, and as he did so discovered a key in the lock on the outside. He turned the key, and chuckled to himself. If Sacco did enter the dining-room, at least his progress to the other parts of the house would be delayed for some time. Lamp in hand, he looked round. There was a door across the hall leading, as he guessed, to a room which was the counterpart of the one he had just left, and facing the front of the house. He crossed to it, and opening the door glanced quickly round. It was evidently a library or study with bookcases on three sides; and the window matched that of the dining-room, being set in the stone-work, with a couple of panes opening on hinges the fastenings of which were secured by small padlocks.

"Good enough!" he whispered to himself, recognizing instantly that only by smashing glass could anyone enter that way.

He left the room, and continued his tour. There was another room opening from the hall,

and he halted outside the door of it, reflected a moment, then set the lamp down a little distance away that its light might not reveal his presence, should Sacco chance to be at that side of the house. He opened the door and looked in. Just as he did so, there was a faint radiance across the room—a thin line of light from outside shining through the joints of shutters.

"Good!" He laughed silently to himself. "Not much chance there for Sacco."

Whilst he looked the light vanished, and leaving the lamp where it was for a moment or two, he entered a short service passage leading, as he guessed, to the kitchen. He found the latter with the door open and again caught a gleam of light, this time over the top of drawn curtains, which precluded any view of the room from outside. Apparently the Italian and himself were making the round of the house together. He found that fact a little amusing, and when the light moved on, observing its direction, he moved on with it, carrying his own lamp to light the way.

The next place was a pantry with a window that, as Sacco's lamp told him, was barred; whilst beyond was a dairy the windows of which were also protected; and as again Sacco moved on, he also moved, and found himself facing a door. Moving along interior lines, he reached it first, saw that it had bolts as well as a lock, and was without a fanlight. He waited quietly; heard the footsteps of the man outside, knew when they ceased that Sacco

had halted just outside the door, and a second later saw the latch move.

Then followed slight noises which indicated that the prowler was trying to pick the lock. Apparently the man was an expert, for, watching, he saw the key turn in the door, and caught the click of the lock as it shot back. Again the latch was lifted, and something rubbed against the door, the man's knee or shoulder for a guess.

"Hell!"

The word, spoken angrily, expressed Sacco's extreme exasperation; and Melcombe almost laughed aloud. The fellow had counted on finding the door unbolted, and was annoyed after his effort to find the way still barred to him. What would he do next?

Scarcely had he asked himself the question when the man moved on. Melcombe heard his steps quite clearly, and a moment later heard them cease abruptly. What had happened? Had the fellow thought of some device—suddenly seen his way?

He listened with ears strained for any informing sound. For a time he heard nothing; then he heard a slight noise which seemed to come from inside the house. He listened. There it was again—a sound that he could not define, but which was one that was most certainly occasioned by the movement of some body, but whether animate or inanimate he could not guess. Had Sacco in that interval of utter silence found his way into the house? It seemed incredible; yet that sound required

investigation, and losing all interest in the rear door, he picked up the lamp and, still carrying the gun, made his way back to the hall. There he had a surprise. Madeline, an apprehensive look on her face, was coming hurriedly down the stairs, carrying her pistol in her hand. As she saw him relief leaped in her dark eyes. Then she whispered quickly:

"Someone has entered the house—by the attics. I heard something creak, and then the sound of feet on the floor above. . . . I am sure there is someone."

Melcombe remembered the sounds he had heard. They might have been made by the girl herself, but he had a conviction that there was another cause for them. In any case, it was as well not to take risks.

"Come down to the hall. I am going to put out the light."

Madeline finished her descent of the stairs; and as she reached his side, for the second time that night Melcombe, ignoring the rule of safety first, blew out the lamp.

CHAPTER XII

AN AWFUL THREAT

HIDDEN in the darkness, the pair stood listening; and presently the utter stillness was broken by the slight creaking of a door, gently opened. For a little time nothing else happened and Melcombe guessed that the intruder, whoever he might be, was listening for any sound that might indicate his intrusion had been noticed.

At last there came the sound for which Melcombe himself had been waiting. Assured that his invasion had gone unnoticed, the nocturnal visitor was moving down the upper stairs—not too cautiously, as Melcombe thought, for a man who had entered another's house surreptitiously. He whispered to Madeline:

"Better stand away from the stairs! At the side there. If the fellow should open hostilities, it might be dangerous to be in sight, you know."

"But you?" she objected.

"I shall remain here. I must see the man—and if I see him first, so much the better. Quick! He has reached the landing, I think."

He felt the girl move away, and himself sought the half-shelter of the newel-post, crouching with the gun ready for action. Then at the

head of the staircase an electric torch flashed with quite startling unexpectedness, its light gleaming on the barrel of the fowling-piece, and dazzling his eyes. Before he could move or speak a familiar voice hailed him.

"For the Lord's sake, Melcombe, don't shoot!"

He jumped with amazement, stood upright, and then cried out:

"Teddy Hamilton!"

"In the flesh—by good luck," came the laughing answer. "And wet to the skin withal."

The holder of the torch began to descend the stairs; and Melcombe, overcome with astonishment, watched him come in silence, momentarily forgetting Madeline Westley's presence, till she recalled herself to notice with a whisper:

"Who is the man?"

"A friend. Teddy Hamilton. But what he is doing here and how he comes to be in the house——"

He broke off sharply, remembering suddenly the other's profession. Hamilton might be a friend, but if he had come to Shapgate on business the friendship might suffer a strain.

"Is he the man of whom you told me? The inspector who——"

She got no further. Hamilton was already on the lower stairs, and he broke on the words laughingly.

"'As a thief in the night,'" he quoted. . . . "But there are sound reasons for this unmannerly intrusion, and——"

"Wait!" interrupted Melcombe. "How did you get in, Teddy? Quick! It is important."

"There's a ladder conveniently reared at the back of the house for the assistance of burglars——"

"A ladder! My aunt! That fellow will find it. If you got in that way he can!"

"The fellow in question? Is he by any chance an Italian from Chicago?"

"Yes—and a killer! Did you look in at the dining-room window a little time ago?"

"I did," answered Hamilton with a grim laugh. "That was how I learned of your presence in this house. But I came near to paying pretty dear for the knowledge. You know someone tried to pot me?"

"Yes. It was the Italian, I think."

"I am sure of it. I scooted to the shadows of the garden. It was his activities made me take this novel way of calling that I might get in touch with you. I did not yearn to be bumped off whilst ringing the front-door bell; and Sacco isn't the man to play hide-and-seek with in an Exmoor fog."

Melcombe glanced at the stairs. "You came through the attics?"

"Yes. There's a window there—one of those pigeon-cote affairs in the roof. A handy sort of contraption. I opened it with my penknife."

"And left it open?"

"I don't remember barring it."

"Then I'll bet you a fiver that Sacco is in that attic now."

"Phew! You don't mean that, Melcombe?"

"Four minutes ago he was prowling round the house trying to find a way in. He will have found it now, and he can move like a cat."

"In that case I'll douse the glim! I don't want to be potted like a roosting pheasant." He switched off his torch, and then, speaking in a lower voice, gave counsel.

"The young lady! She had better take cover and—— Hark! By heaven, you've won your bet, Melcombe! The fellow *is* in the house. Get the lady to safety. If the ruffian starts to shoot——"

Melcombe, having no doubt as to Sacco's willingness to shoot, acted quickly. "Come, Madeline," he said, "the library. It will be dangerous for you here!" He found her arm, and together they groped their way to the library door. "Wait here until we get the rascal. Courage——"

"I am less afraid of Sacco than of that officer," she whispered as she entered the library. "Why is he here?"

"To get Sacco, I imagine. Remember, he did not know I was here; and he knows nothing of you. Don't worry, my dear! Wait a second." He struck a match. "That big chair there. You will be out of range of—er—trouble. Quick! I must help Hamilton."

He led her to the chair, and as the match went out, kissed her; then groped his way to the door. The slightest warning hiss reached him from the officer, and he closed the door silently; and with the gun ready, stood in the hall waiting.

"Keep still!"

The words were spoken in a low whisper, and he knew that Hamilton was no more than a couple of yards away. He stared through the blackness in the direction of the stairs, unable to see anything; but his ears informed him that overhead someone was moving.

"The fellow's got a nerve," he thought to himself, "or he doesn't know that Hamilton is in the house."

Then followed a period of waiting. The sounds of movement had discontinued. Either Sacco had discovered that all was not well for him, or he had paused to ascertain his position before continuing his mystifying errand. The waiting was very trying. Strain as he would he heard nothing, saw nothing; and he was beginning to think that Hamilton had been mistaken, and that the Italian was not yet in the house, when he heard a stair creak ever so lightly. His heart leaped at the sound. The man was there on the stairs after all. The critical moment was at hand. No sign came from Hamilton, and Melcombe was wondering if he had heard the creak which proclaimed Sacco's approach, when there was a little click. The beam of light that followed showed Sacco three parts down the stairs, his eyes blinking in the sudden light, and then followed Hamilton's voice, speaking peremptorily:

"Hands up, Sacco!"

The challenged man's reply was a shot from the pistol with the silencer, which knocked the torch from Hamilton's hand, and wounded him

in the arm. The hall was plunged in complete darkness, and Hamilton cried with an oath:

"He got me! Pepper the stairs, Melcombe. Get the beggar's legs."

Melcombe, who had been staring directly at the stairs, lifted the shot-gun and fired through the darkness—a vain shot, for the flash of the shot showed him the lower stairs were empty. Sacco had gone back, no doubt with the intention of leaving the house by the way that he had entered. Well, there was a way of catching him yet, if only he had luck. He moved towards the hall door and, striking a match, began to undo the bolt and chain.

"What's the game, Melcombe?" asked Hamilton quickly.

"I'm going to the foot of the ladder. You shepherd him up to the attic. We shall trap him that way." He had the door already open when he heard a noisy voice from the stairs.

"Here, what be the meanin' ov this?"

Glancing over his shoulder, he saw the caretaker standing at the head of the stairs, candle in hand, dressed only in shirt and trousers, a look of utter amazement on his honest face.

"A burglar!" he shouted back. "Help this gentleman here who is a police officer——"

He stayed to make no further explanation. Slipping outside, he began to feel his way round the house, taking the way that Sacco had followed when he had been searching for an entrance. He moved as quickly and quietly as he could, but had the ill-luck to kick against a water-can which clanged soundingly in the stillness. He

turned the corner, and as he did so heard something scraping against the house wall, and with a swift intuition of the truth leaped backward. A second later there was a crash almost at his feet, accompanied by the sound of splintering wood. He stooped quickly and, groping in the blackness, touched the rung of a ladder. He had no doubt that Sacco had used it, and had stayed sufficiently long to throw it down in order to delay pursuit that way, which struck him as a futile thing.

The Italian, he thought, must be very near; and he hurried silently forward. The sound of Hamilton's voice overhead reached him, shouting that Sacco was clear away, but he made no reply; since to do so would betray his presence to the fugitive. At the next corner he paused to listen, but heard nothing of his quarry, and continued on his way round the house without finding any sign of him. As he reached the main door again, he saw Hamilton, coatless, in the hall, with the caretaker holding the candle, whilst Madeline was binding up the officer's arm.

"No luck?" asked Hamilton as he entered.

"No! The fellow threw the ladder down and ran, or hid. Anyway, in this fog one might as well search blindfolded for a particular stick in a wood."

"Anyway," said Hamilton tersely, "I'm going to search."

"But, Teddy——"

"Fellow will take the road, won't he? He's bound to in this fog. He can't have more than two or three minutes' start——"

"But your arm——? You can't——"

"Can't I? You'll see," answered Hamilton with a grim laugh. "I know what to expect now, and I haven't gone stalking in Scotland for nothing. . . . Thank you, Miss Martin. That will do very nicely."

He slipped on his coat and a trench-coat in a way which told Melcombe that the arm was not seriously hurt; then he turned to the door. "See you come daylight, if I get that murderous scoundrel—— If not—well, the Lord knows when."

"Take care of yourself, Teddy."

Hamilton waved an arm in acknowledgment, stepped out of doors and was immediately swallowed in the mist. Melcombe followed him to the steps and stood listening. He heard the sound of his feet die away in the night; then he turned and closed the door, quite convinced that his friend had departed on a fruitless chase. He found Madeline making some sort of explanation to the caretaker, and heard the latter's voice in amazement:

"A burglar; but what vor do ee want to come here? There'm nothin' vor en to take——"

"Well, he wouldn't know that, Snowe, would he?" A little laugh accompanied the words, proving to Melcombe that the girl's courage was in no way shaken by Sacco's attempt upon the house. The caretaker laughed with her.

"Noa! He'd have been finely sucked in. But as he'm gone one may zo well go back to the blankets. I reckon us'll have some sleepy-heads to Shapgate come breakfast-time this morning."

He began to mount the stairs, leaving the candle he had brought with him, and Melcombe turned to Madeline smilingly.

"You too, my dear. The daylight may bring new adventures; but I fancy the show is over for the night."

"And you?"

"A chair in the library there. Whatever else may happen, Sacco won't come back to-night, and he may not return at all if he knows, as he must now, that Hamilton is after him. I will keep the candle, if I may."

"Of course."

She glanced up the staircase—the caretaker for some reason had paused on the landing—and with a little laugh she kissed her fingers to Melcombe, and lightly mounted the stairs. At the landing she turned again, waved her hand and disappeared. Melcombe saw to the barring and locking of the main door; then, carrying the candle and the gun, he turned into the library, and leaving the door open in order that he might hear anything moving in the house, he sought out a comfortable chair, and with an Indian rug taken from a couch, made himself cosy for the night.

For a time he sat with the candle burning, and indulged in a couple of cigarettes whilst he reflected on various things—Sacco's daring, Hamilton's unexpected advent, and most of all Madeline's acceptance of himself as her lover. He reflected how little he knew about her antecedents; and told himself that did not matter a button.

" One marries the girl, not the antecedents ! " he laughed softly.

" But her father ? " suggested his questioning mind. " Why should there be such mystery about his goings, and what secret is held in that sealed envelope at The Stag, for which Sacco is so eager ? "

He recalled that it was not Sacco only who was eager to obtain that envelope. To that end unquestionably Lincoln O'Hara had shot Perelli in that house in Devonshire ; and thither had come Madeline herself searching by night like any thief, and in the morning prepared to " stick-up " the owner of the house in order to get possession of it. What was behind it all, and did Hamilton, who had shown up so unexpectedly, know of the envelope ? Had he any inkling of the secret it held, or had he come to Shapgate at the heels of Sacco for some other reason ? And how had he fallen on the Italian's trail, since it was almost certain he had not been in the train by which his quarry had left Paddington ?

The questions baffled him. He could find no answers to them, and after a time blew out the candle and settled himself to sleep, with no thought of Sacco, or Hamilton, or Lincoln O'Hara, or of anyone save Madeline Westley, whose visioned face came and went in the darkness about him until he fell asleep.

A little time passed. Then there was a faint stir in the room—little more than a rustle, a sound that a cat might have made in leaping to a chair. It was too slight to disturb Mel-

combe's slumbers; and sounds that followed were of the same light quality; faint enough to go unmarked by any ears not on the alert. It seemed that there was someone in the room moving very cautiously, and, by the direction from which the faint sounds came, making for the door.

Apparently the furtive one reached and passed the door, for a little time after there was a creaking on the stairs, a very slight creaking, and one that on a breezy night would probably have gone unnoticed by any inhabitant of the house. But the night was not breezy. It was still with that profound stillness induced by fog in windless hours. Every slight sound indoors was accentuated by the dumbness outside; and Madeline Westley, lying awake in the darkness, heard the creaking quite clearly.

She thought nothing of it, however. All houses have odd little noises of their own, noticeable at night, when chairs and other inanimate things seem to stretch themselves in the quietness. The creaking ceased, and she turned over to the other side, wooing the sleep that excitement had driven from her eyes. She lay facing the door, which was white, covered with some paint that seemed to have a faint luminous quality; for despite the darkness, the outline of the door was just visible. For a time she stared at the nebulous outline, then finding her eyes growing tired, closed them in the hope that now she would sleep. The hope, however, was denied her, and involuntarily opening her eyes anew, she saw the door again. There was some-

thing odd about it now, she thought. There was a broad surface that had that misty luminousness, with a broad bar of blackness running its whole length; and then again a narrow streak of what by contrast was white. She had not observed that before, and she was interested by it. With an idea that it was a mere optical illusion she closed her eyes again, and kept them shut for a little time. When she opened them afresh the bar of black had disappeared, and the narrow strip and the broader were one again.

She noted the fact without much interest. She had been right about the illusion. Her eyes staring through the darkness had been playing tricks and—— The indolent thought broke off uncompleted as her attention was arrested by a new phenomenon. A blur had formed against that space of dim white, a dark blur that seemed to be growing, lifting itself up, moving! It interested her more than the vertical strip of blackness had done, and again she shut her eyes, and, opening them suddenly, distinctly saw the shadowy blur slowly move until only a part of it remained; and almost in the same second she caught a slight sound which her excited imagination took for a sharp outletting of breath by someone who had arrested the natural action of the lungs to the limit.

She experienced a swift chill of fear. It swept through all her frame like a cold aura pricking her skin to goose-flesh. She tried to tell herself that here was another illusion, that her eyes in conjunction with her heated imagina-

tion were calling phantasmal things into being; giving form to things that existed only in her brain. The attempt failed. She knew that the contrary was true. By that undefinable apprehension which warns us of presences unseen, she knew beyond all question that there was someone in the room, someone who, having entered, had stood for a moment outlined against the white door, and who now was standing cloaked in darkness, waiting, perhaps staring at her on her white bed.

"Who? Who? Who?"

Her mind as it reiterated the question shouted the answer.

"Sacco!"

In that moment of terrific realization she came near to screaming with fear. But with a swift remembrance that to make a din would double her peril, she checked the impulse born of sheer terror, and the repressed scream became a gasp.

The sound apparently was sufficient to tell the intruder that she was aware of his presence, and a second later a hoarse whisper came out of the blackness.

"Keep as still as a stiff, or by all that's holy I'll corpse yah."

She kept as still as she could, shivering at the cold ferocity of the whispering voice; then the darkness was broken by the flash of an electric lamp, the beam of which thrown in her eyes half blinded her, forcing her to close them, and almost in the same moment the intruder spoke again.

"Light that candle on the chair."

There was a candle in a china candlestick which formed part of the toilet set, which on her return to her room she had removed from the dressing-table to the chair by the bed. The matches were there also; and since anything was better than the darkness, hiding she knew not what peril, she made haste to obey the man, lighting the candle with trembling fingers. The flame was feeble at first; and not until the melting wax fed it to strength did she look up.

As she had already guessed, the intruder was Sacco. She had been sure of it from the beginning, yet the confirmation given by her eyes moved her to new apprehension.

"You!" she whispered. "You!"

The man laughed silently, his dark eyes dancing with ferocious mirth.

"Gets yah under the belt, hey? Thought yah'd done with me when those guys downstairs chivied me off the premises, hey? Well, yah see, yah ain't."

Madeline Westley was beginning to get hold of herself; and as the fellow whispered his jibe, curiosity moved her to a question:

"How did you get in the house again?"

Sacco chuckled. "By the main door. Whilst one of 'em was chivying me outside and number two was up in the pigeon-loft, I jest slipped round the house, an' finding the door wide to the world, naturally stepped in, knowing that pair of rubes wouldn't think of going over a covert already beaten."

"But——" the girl began and broke off.

"But yah'd say yah was in the hall. So yah

was, one foot on the stairs, staring up to the landing. Yah never glimpsed or heard me, an' I just dived into that room on the right, an' hid behind a big divan. 'Twas just as easy as chewing gum."

A sudden fear surged in Madeline Westley's heart.

"You hid . . . in . . . in . . ."

"Yeah!" Sacco grinned understanding. "In that chamber with the books, where that guy who helped yah in the train came to camp."

The girl's fear doubled. What had happened in the library? She knew the scoundrel standing there, sardonic mirth in his dark eyes, was no respecter of human life. He had proved that by the two shots that he had fired that night. Had he fired a third shot; and was the man so newly her lover lying in the library cold and stark as she had seen Perelli lie in that house in Devon?

Her apprehension was revealed in her face, burned in her dark eyes, and Sacco reading the signs like the print of an open book, grinned again.

"Don't get hysterical, sister! Your fancy man ain't been bumped off yet. He's sleeping like a tired dog; an' I ain't taking the chance to hurt him, if yah behaves agreeable."

The girl was relieved by his assurance, and asked quickly: "What do you want me to do?"

"Jest to hand over them documents he brought yah, to-day——"

"Documents! He brought none," answered Madeline quickly.

"Sister, that won't pass over the bank counter. There ain't no hayseeds in my whiskers! So yah jest hand over them docs. an' save a heap of sorrow."

"But I tell you——"

"Not in that voice! I got quick ears; an' a whisper is enough. Jest remember that or, by Gee! yah'll go headlong to Kingdom come. . . . Now, where's them papers?"

"I told you the truth. I have seen no papers!"

Sacco took a step towards the bed, a quick silent step which brought him within hand-reach of her. His eyes gleamed with a tigerish menace. Then he whispered hoarsely: "Don't yah try no flim-flam wi' me. Yah don't know what yah're up against, seemingly. But I'll make it clear. Yah're from Chicago, an' maybe yah remember that affair of Cicero Jane?"

Madeline Westley did remember. The affair of Cicero Jane was a case of a particularly brutal murder. The girl in question being gagged, bound, and hanged from a hook in her own wardrobe in a tenement in the gangster quarter of the city to prevent her giving evidence in a case before the courts. She shivered again at the threat implied in the question.

"Remember, I see. Well, I'll give yah a bit of news—'twas me who strung her up." The villain made his boasting confession in the most ordinary whisper, watching the girl to note the effect, then he broke out ferociously: "An', by God, I'll string yah up the same if yah don't

come across with them documents, before I can wink twice."

He sat down on the bed suddenly, and leaned forward until his face touched hers, his eyes searching her with their fierce burning. She tried to shrink back, but the pillow held her head; and with his face so close that she could feel his hot breath he fairly hissed:

"Now yah will tell me, hey?"

"But I cannot. I have no papers. I——"

He struck her cruelly with the back of his hand, bruising her lip. At the brutality of it and the sudden pain she gave a sharp cry. But a hand over her mouth crushed the sound, and almost checked her breath. After a minute the hand was removed, and the scoundrel lifted himself up from the bed. The girl, cowed and a little dazed by the cruel blow, watched his eyes wander round the room and come to rest on the thick scarlet cord of an old-fashioned bell-pull, hanging on the wall by the bed-side. She saw the gleam of triumph leap in his eyes; and the next moment he had removed the candle to the dressing-table and, penknife in hand, was standing on a chair, plainly with the intention of cutting the cord high up.

A dumb horror gripped the girl. If the man's boast about Cicero Jane was true, it was possible that she must share that unhappy one's end. Hypnotized by sheer terror of her threatened fate, she watched the man as he stretched his arm upward to cut as long a length of cord as was possible. She wanted to cry out but could not. Her tongue seemed frozen to the roof of

her mouth. Her lips were stiff, immobile. She was utterly helpless with that awful helplessness that is induced by terrific fear.

Then a thing unlooked for happened. The webbed cane of the chair seat, on which Sacco was standing, yielded suddenly under his weight. As his foot went through, to save himself the fellow clutched at the rope, and somewhere in the silent house a bell jangled harshly, making a din that even in that upper room was clearly audible. Sacco released the rope suddenly and the bell spoke again. He swore savagely; dragged his foot from the wreck of the chair and stepped down, just as Madeline Westley, inspired by the thought of deliverance, broke through the frozen immobility of fear, and lifted herself up in bed. The man snarled at her fiercely, struck brutally with his fist, once, knocking her senseless, extinguished the candle by flicking candlestick and candle to the carpet, then using his flash-light to guide him to the door, hurriedly fled the room.

CHAPTER XIII

SHOTS ON THE MOOR

THE jangling peal of the bell so violently pulled awakened Melcombe out of the sleep into which he had fallen. He sat up with a start, listening, caught the tinkling to which the first clamour had died down; then rose from his chair and began to make his way to the door, with the thought in his mind that Teddy Hamilton, having found his pursuit of Sacco useless, had returned.

He groped his way into the hall, struck a match to light him to the door, and having drawn the bolts and turned the key, opened the door. He could see nothing, and asked rather sharply:

"That you, Teddy?"

He got no answer, but a second later caught the sound of swift feet behind him, and before he could turn a pair of hands caught his shoulders and he was propelled forward. He shot down the steps and was flung down on the gravel beyond. Even in his surprise he was conscious of the man who was the cause of his disaster, and was made more aware of him as rolling over he received a violent kick which caught him in the solar plexus, and temporarily put him out of

action. He did not lose consciousness, but his breath went, there was a rush of blood to his head; a violent ringing in his ears; and to his eyes, the darkness of the night was shot with orange fire, through which a myriad black specks danced like motes in a sunbeam.

For the best part of a minute he rolled on the gravel in agonized helplessness; then the worst of the spasm passed, and he lay still, gasping for breath, whilst his mind recalled what had befallen. One thing was clear to him. There had been someone in the house who, rushing to make his exit, had been the cause of his own disaster, and the bell. He sat up suddenly, and groaned with pain as he did so. The bell had not been the door-bell, it had been one of the house-bells. But who had rung it? Not the man who had propelled him through the doorway and down the steps and dealt with him so violently as he had fled. That was certain. Someone in the house—— The thought went uncompleted. Formless fears leaped in his heart as he staggered painfully to his feet. For a moment he stood swaying with dizziness, and almost overcome by the nausea it induced; then slowly he made his way to the steps, mounted them, passed into the hall, shut and locked the door, and with his shoulders against it rested for a second, whilst he considered.

He must have a light to make his investigations. There was the candle in the library—striking another match, he entered the room, found and lit the candle, and then moved back to the hall and faced the staircase. He was in

considerable pain ; the hand that held the candle shook so much that the liquid wax was thrown here and there ; and as he began to mount he was forced to grip the rail with his free hand to save himself from falling. He could hear nothing for the ringing in his ears ; and more than once the dim staircase was blotted from vision by a surging wave of blackness which recurred with almost every step he took.

He reached the landing at last, and there was forced to halt for a full minute whilst he fought back the faintness which threatened to overcome him. Then he looked along the gallery. A wide-open door caught his eyes, and he began to move towards it. For a second he paused in the doorway, caught a faint perfume which revealed feminine occupation, then without knocking he stepped into the room.

As he did so he experienced a great shock. The room was in some disarray. An overturned chair with a broken seat lay on the floor. Beside it was a china candlestick snapped in two, with the unlighted candle a foot or so away. All that he saw in the first glance, then as his eyes went to the bed his heart, which had been beating with painful irregularity, seemed to stand still, and he was gripped by overwhelming fear ; for half in and half out of bed, head and one arm hanging limply towards the floor, was Madeline.

A cry of horror broke from him. He thought that she was dead, and remembering the man who had fled the house in such haste, he had no doubt that he had been here and that this was

his evil work. He shouted again in the hope of rousing the caretaker, and then half-blindly stumbled towards the bed. Setting the candle on the floor, he lifted the girl up so that her head reposed upon the pillow, and as he did so noticed the bruised and swollen lip, the angry mark on the white temple, and his fear became panic. He bent towards her.

"Dear God!" he groaned.

Then hope came in a great surge, as on his cheek he felt her faint breath. She lived. Whatever had happened in this room, that was for him the outstanding fact—the one thing that mattered.

In a moment he was at the door, shouting at the top of his voice, kicking with his heels on the door to make a din. His effort this time was successful. It brought Snowe running with a scared look on his face.

"Why, zur, whatever be to do now? Have ——"

"Brandy! Get some brandy if you have it. Quick, man. It is a matter of life and death."

The caretaker realized the need for urgency. His eyes were popping with amazement, but he ran off, and in wonderfully quick time appeared with a half-bottle of brandy and a glass.

"Good man!" said Melcombe praisefully. "Now rouse your wife——"

"She'm roused, zur. Never zo wide-awake in her——"

"Bring her here, then—to Miss Martin's room. She's needed. There's been devil's work——"

"Lord help us!"

The man hurried off, and Melcombe went back to the girl. She lay as he had placed her—her head on the pillow, her bruised lips slightly open, the white of her eyes showing under the half-closed lids. Again fear gripped him, but resolutely holding it in check, he poured a very little brandy in the glass, and then sought to introduce it drop by drop into the half-open lips. He was so engaged when Mrs. Snowe, in considerable deshabille, entered the door.

"Dear! Dear!" she said, and without so much as a by-your-leave took the glass from his hands. "Let me try, zur, an' you just tell Snowe to get a spoon. 'Twill be better than the glass."

Melcombe, realizing that, startled as she must be, the woman was not flustered, yielded his place to her and carried her command to the caretaker, who now, half dressed, was outside the door.

"A teaspoon, Snowe! Quick!"

The caretaker hurried off, and standing in the doorway consumed with apprehension, Melcombe watched the efforts of the woman, whilst his mind sought the meaning of what had befallen. His eyes fell on the bell-rope. It was by that he was sure that the jangling bell which had awakened him had been rung. Probably Madeline, awakened suddenly from sleep, had seen or become aware of some intruder in her room, and in the instant of being attacked had gripped and tugged the bell-rope in a desperate call for the help. But the intruder—the ruffian who had done this thing? Who was he? . . .

Sacco? It did not seem possible that it could be anyone else. The fellow fleeing must have doubled in his tracks, and by some means have re-entered the house. There was no other possible explanation, and as he thought of what must have befallen in this room, he was shaken by a great anger.

"I'll get that brute, yet. Thrash him; wring his foul neck——"

"Ah!"

The exclamation came from Mrs. Snowe in a tone that expressed gratification.

He moved a little way into the room, just as the caretaker came running with the spoon. Taking it, he handed it to the woman, who whispered:

"She'm reviving—the poor dear! Better keep back a little, zur. The fewer she d'see when she opens her eyes, the better, I reckon."

Melcombe stepped back, his fear lightening a little, and waited with a prayerful hope that all might yet be well. He had not very long to wait. He heard the woman speak in a soothing voice:

"Drink this, my dear! Noa, don't ee try to talk yet."

He looked towards the bed. Madeline's eyes were opened, there was a dazed look on her white face, then the brows creased in an effort of remembrance. He saw the remembrance come. A look of utter fear came on her face, then her eyes, wide with horror, fixed themselves on the bell-rope. She shivered violently and gave a little moan. Her eyes closed, opened

again, and still stared at the scarlet rope as if it held for her a terrible fascination. Melcombe wondered why it should so hold her attention, but it was a few minutes before he had an inkling of the reason, for Madeline came near to swooning again, and only the efforts of the motherly Mrs. Snowe and the stimulant she compelled the girl to take saved her from another spell of unconsciousness.

After a little time she spoke in a stronger voice.

"That man, Sacco . . . he has gone?"

"There'm no man here but Mr. Melcombe an' my old gaffer," replied Mrs. Snowe cheerfully.

"But Sacco was here . . . in my room. . . . He struck me, and was going to . . . to hang me . . . with the bell-rope there."

"God in heaven!" whispered Melcombe by the doorway, never doubting the girl's words. "When I meet that brute——"

"There, there, my dear," said Mrs. Snowe soothingly, evidently under the impression that Madeline's mind was wandering. "Don't ee worry. Facts bain't never zo black as our vain imaginings. Just ee put wild thoughts away from ee, they'm no more reality than hobgoblins an'——"

"But it is true what I am telling you. He stood on the chair there to cut down the rope, and the cane gave way. He fell and pulled the rope as he did so . . . I heard the bell ring. . . . Then he struck me, and . . . I must have been knocked senseless."

She lifted herself up in bed a little, and stared at the floor.

"Look," she said, pointing dramatically, "there is the penknife he was using."

Melcombe following the indicating finger saw something gleaming on the carpet. Moving into the room, he picked it up. It was an open penknife. He stood with it in his hand a moment, looking at it with hard eyes and shaken by a great wrath as he thought of the horror she had faced, then he turned to Madeline and slipped an arm round her shoulder.

"Never mind, dearest. Put the thing out of your thoughts. Don't dwell upon it. The villain won't come back again, I will see to that. . . . And some day he shall pay for this to the uttermost farthing. . . . I don't know how he managed to re-enter the house——"

"Through the main door, he told me—whilst you were hunting for him outside. He was in hiding in the library . . . when you entered, he told me . . . at first I was afraid that he had killed you."

"Phew!" whistled Melcombe, realizing that he must have had an extremely narrow escape. "It was clever and daring of the scoundrel to come back like that. But I think we have finished with him for to-night."

"I . . . I hope so."

"You must not worry," he said. "You must rest. I promise you, my dear, there will be no more of Sacco to-night."

"I don't think I can rest. My head is aching terribly and——"

"Poor maid!" broke in Mrs. Snowe. "I'll get something for that bruise; an' a medicine that will cure the headache. If ee'll excuse me one li'l minute, zur."

She was gone longer than that and when she returned she brought with her some home-made unguent, and a decoction of herbs such as rural folk in remote places still use. She applied the unguent and then held out the cup.

"Now drink this, maidy, an' come daylight ee'll be zo vit as a viddle."

The girl drank the decoction, and received instructions.

"Now lie down, an' quiet your mind. Count sheep comin' through a gate an' before ee d'get to the hundredth ee'll be zound asleep."

"But you must leave me a light," said Madeline quickly.

"All the candles in the house if zo be ee want 'em, missy."

"Two! . . . I think. Two will do!" Her dark eyes wandered to the bell-rope and she shivered. "Can't you . . . take . . . that down?. . . It makes me imagine things. The colour of it——"

"Of course!" said Melcombe quickly, and standing on the damaged chair, disconnected the rope from the bell-wire. "I'll take it with me."

"Thank you."

Mrs. Snowe slipped from the room and returned with another candle. As she did so she looked at Melcombe and indicated the door with her eyes. Understanding that she desired him to go, he

made an excuse and left the room, but remained standing outside the door. A murmur of voices reached him for a little time, slackened, and then died away altogether; and a moment or two later Mrs. Snowe came out of the room, and softly closed the door behind her.

"Sound as a top," she said. "Poor lamb! That potion will keep her sleeping till noon; an' what be bogies in the night be nought when the sun be shinin' . . . But must have had a bad fright, I d'reckon."

"Yes," answered Melcombe. "I'm afraid so."

"That man?" asked the woman curiously. "He'm no common burglar zeemingly. What be he after?"

"Something that isn't here at all."

"Then ee do know what he want?"

"More or less. It is something belonging to Miss—er—Martin's father. I can't tell you more, because I don't know. . . . I'm afraid you've had a rather exciting night, and I am sorry you should have been so disturbed."

"Nought!" said the woman, and listened to count the strokes of a clock downstairs. "'Twill be daylight in an hour. Reckon 'tisn't worth while to go to bed again for that short time. . . . Maybe ee could drink a cup ov tea, zur?"

"I could," said Melcombe eagerly.

"Then ee shall have one in no time. I'll send my wold man to pull the turves together. . . . I d's'pose ee'll go back to the library?"

"Only to get your husband's gun. I'm going to camp just here, outside this door, until dawn."

The woman looked at him quickly. "Ee think that rascal will come back?"

"No, I don't. But I am taking no chances. I shall sit here with the gun, just to make sure."

"Maybe 'twill be wise."

The woman went her way, and Melcombe went down to the library for the gun. Returning, he secured a chair, and seated himself in front of Madeline's door with the gun across his knees. Mrs. Snowe brought the tea, and as he sipped it Melcombe reflected on the events of the night and wondered what the day would bring forth. Of one thing he was sure. The sooner Horace G. Westley arrived and was given possession of his precious envelope the better; for Sacco could scarcely be acting alone, and it was more then likely that presently he would be joined by his friends, in which case things might become really desperate. For a moment he visioned himself shut up with Madeline and the two Snowes in this solitary house enduring a siege. The thing might go on for days. It seemed almost absurd to think of such a thing happening in England; but in this remote Exmoor house, to which for weeks together no one from the outside world would ever come, it was highly possible. Three or four desperate men, planted at strategic places, could easily make it impossible for anyone to leave the house; whilst if they were so willed they might make an attack in force.

There were, however, things to be set on the other side. The presence of Teddy Hamilton in

the neighbourhood was one. Evidently he knew something of Sacco's activities; and if he failed to come in touch with him in the mist and darkness, might possibly return in the daylight. Then there was Bobby Medway! As like as not he would be on his way now, and some time after breakfast, fog permitting, would show up with the Alvis. Then there was Westley himself. When he appeared the trouble would either come quickly to a head or pass away. But whatever happened, he himself could not desert Madeline, and at all costs he was resolved to deliver her from this peril in which at present she moved.

Dawn came at last, weeping and grey. He saw it light the window which was at the end of the gallery; and noted that the mist was still thick outside. Rising, he went to the window and looked forth. Very dimly he could discern the trees in the garden, but nothing beyond them; for all the moor, miles of which in clear weather must be visible from this window, was under the grey pall of vapour.

He went down into the hall, and opening the door, looked cautiously forth. He could see nothing more than he had seen from the upper window; but close at hand he heard a dog bark joyously, caught the lowing of cattle, the clinking of a milk-pail, and heard the voice of Snowe, exhorting some restless milcher—

"Keep still, 'ee wold vool!"

Those homely sounds were reassuring. The adventurous episodes of the night had the remoteness of a nightmare recalled in daylight. He

stepped on to the terrace, ventured as far as the gate and looked up and down the road. With the fog curtaining everything a few yards away, naturally he saw nothing ; and but for the drip from the trees there was no sound.

He returned to the house in good heart ; ate with an appetite the country breakfast provided by Mrs. Snowe, and afterwards with the gun handy established himself at an upper window, from which, if the fog broke, he would have a wide outlook. The morning was well advanced before there was any change. The wind blowing from the direction of the sea swept the mist before it like clouds of smoke at swealing time, leaving a mile or two of the moor fairly clear to view. Eagerly and carefully he scanned the stretch of moor thus made clear—each fold, each patch of gorse, each copse of scrub-oak, without seeing any sign of human presences.

A section of the road was visible, and that also he examined closely. Nothing moved there, not even a sheep ambled across it. It was empty as a toper's glass.

So long as the view remained clear he kept close vigil, on the look out for any sign of movement, but finding none ; and when a little later the mist once more began to drift up and hide the view afresh he had seen nothing in the least disturbing. Had Sacco, discovering Hamilton at his heels, fled the scene of his exploits ? He did not believe that. The crimes already perpetrated proved that the quest on which he and his allies were engaged was too important to be lightly abandoned. No doubt the villain was

watching somewhere, or perhaps waiting at the inn for the advent of his friends, to whom by this he had probably sent an S.O.S.

As the morning wore on he began to wonder what had become of Hamilton. Had he lost himself in the fog and darkness of the night, or was he also on the watch, waiting for the appearance of the man at whose heels he had arrived so opportunely last night? How had he got on the trail of Sacco at all? For most certainly he had not been in the train by which the Italian had travelled from Paddington.

He could ask questions, but he could not answer them; and with nothing happening and Madeline still keeping her room he found time rather heavy on his hands; for though it was necessary to be vigilant, a vigil that was fruitless was boring. After lunch, having heard nothing, seen nothing, he took the gun, and with the mist lifting a little made a perambulation round the property, circumnavigating the wall. There was no sign of anyone, and when he reached the gate again, had he not known the determination of the men with whom he had to deal, he might have thought that they had given up their enterprise. But that, he was sure, was not the case. With Horace G. Westley due to arrive at Shapgate that night, the prevailing quietness could be no more than a lull before the storm.

The mist continued to lift. By three in the afternoon the moor in the immediate neighbourhood of the house was quite clear; and once more he had recourse to the upper window.

From this point of vantage he could see a mile or two of road on either side. He watched both stretches alertly ; since those whom he expected might make their advent from either direction. For quite a long time he saw nothing but a bunch of ponies moving to a new feeding-ground ; then, half a mile away, a man appeared suddenly on the road. He saw him quite plainly, and his heart-beats quickened as he thought that possibly something was going to happen at last.

The man appeared to be moving very slowly in the direction of Shapgate. Was it Sacco or one of his friends, or Hamilton ? He had no means of knowing. The pedestrian might indeed be just a common wayfarer tramping from one casual ward to another and not anxious to arrive at his destination before the regulation hour, or he might be a moor-man following his lawful occupations. But that he should have appeared so suddenly upon the road struck Melcombe as a little curious, if not suspicious, though the suspicion was a little discounted by the fact that he was moving along the road openly, without any attempt at concealment.

Then an odd thing happened. The man halted, turned slowly round and appeared to be interested in the road behind him. A moment later, moving more quickly than he had hitherto done, he dived for a patch of tall bracken at the side of the road and disappeared completely from view. Whoever he was, the fellow had seen or heard something which had driven him to cover.

Sure now that the man was no tramp, Mel-

combe watched the road closely, both in the neighbourhood of the man's hiding-place and in the direction in which he had stared before taking to the bracken. A minute or two passed, and then over the crest of an undulation of the road a car came into view, travelling at a great pace. Here then was the cause of the wayfarer's plunge in the bracken. He did not wish to be seen by the occupant or occupants of the car. That put a new complexion on the incident; and with his interest deepened enormously, Melcombe gave his attention to the car.

Whoever was at the wheel could drive. He came along the rough road at a great pace. Soon he had almost reached the patch of bracken where the pedestrian lay concealed. In another second he would be past it. Then there happened what to Melcombe was a surprising thing. The concealed man lifted himself suddenly into view, waving his arms and apparently signalling the driver of the car to stop.

At first Melcombe thought the man at the car's wheel was ignoring the signal, for he shot by the other at a rattling speed. But a second later the car slowed down, and twenty yards beyond the patch of bracken came to a standstill; then in reverse began to run backward. The man who had given the signal was now stumbling forward to meet the vehicle; and as the car pulled up again, there was, it seemed, a brief consultation, then the pedestrian climbed up beside the driver and the car once more moved forward.

"Someone cadging a lift!" murmured Mel-

combe to himself. "But why did he hide in the bracken?"

That puzzled him, and with increasing interest he watched the car as it came on, rapidly approaching the house. It was less than four hundred yards away when Melcombe recognized it.

"By Jupiter! The Alvis. That means that Bobby——"

The car lurched sharply towards the rough grass at the edge of the road, was indeed within an ace of disaster; then it recovered, and swept on again, and behind it, a short distance from the road, Melcombe saw a little plume of smoke. An instant later on a small knoll two men appeared, and one of them stretched an arm. Again there was a plume of smoke, and this time the truth was borne upon him with a flash of lightning. The Alvis was under fire. The men for whom he had watched for half the day were there, but a few hundred yards from Shapgate, and, counting on the immunity the solitude afforded, had brazenly opened hostilities.

"My stars!" he ejaculated, and the next moment was running helter-skelter down the stairs to meet his friend.

CHAPTER XIV

THE WATCHERS

HE reached the gate in time to fling it open, and saw Lord Bobby grin as he swept through. At the same time he glimpsed the passenger. It was Teddy Hamilton, gaunt, hollow-eyed and plainly in some distress. Flinging-to the gate, he ran to the car, as his friend leaped out, and hurried to the other door to help the inspector.

"A warm reception," laughed Bobby. "We arrived under fire——"

"Yes, I saw——" Melcombe looked a little anxiously at Hamilton. The latter guessed what was in his mind, and shook his head.

"No! They missed."

"But there's a spot on the Alvis somewhere," said Bobby with a chuckle. "Honourable scar, what! I heard the bullet hit her. Good thing that marksman didn't get a tyre. . . . Seems we're in for a little excitement. The Lord be praised. . . . But I say, I am forgetting. I'm awfully sorry, Hamilton, old chap. Take a shoulder and I'll help you into the house."

"No need," answered Hamilton with a thin laugh. "Having walked over half Exmoor in

mist and darkness, I can yet manage the steps. . . . But for high heaven's sake, Melcombe, hurry up the victualling department. . . . I'm just a famished wolf."

"All right, Hamilton. Walk in. I'll give Mrs. Snowe instructions." He turned to Lord Bobby. "Better watch the moor, old man. Those sportsmen may mean immediate mischief."

"I hope they do," answered Bobby cheerfully. He turned to the car, and from a kit-bag in the tonneau took a Webley automatic. Then he laughed. "I'm ready for them now. And the beauty of it is, they opened the ball. There's the testimony of the C.I.D. for that if trouble eventuates, and a man has a right to shoot in self-defence. Go in and feed the famished wolf. I'll keep the bridge all right. We can talk afterwards."

Melcombe followed Hamilton into the house, and sought out Mrs. Snowe, who promptly produced cold ham, cheese and cider, and Hamilton talked whilst he ate.

"I didn't find that Italian beggar—last night——"

"No! He was here, in the house. Walked in at the front door whilst I was outside and you were in the attic."

"The devil!" cried the inspector. "You don't say! The fellow must have an armour-plated nerve! . . . Anything happen?"

"Yes!"

Melcombe gave a brief account of occurrences, and at the end Hamilton whistled sharply.

"You say he was going to hang that girl I saw here last night?"

"He threatened that, and she believed him. Whether he really meant it or not I don't know."

"You think he might be bluffing for some purpose or other."

"Might be, or may have really meant it. He's a killer, as you ought to know; and his type runs to brutality."

"Yes," agreed Hamilton thoughtfully, then shot a question. "Who is the girl, Melcombe?"

"The one I'm going to marry," answered the other with a laugh.

"And the lady who tried to burgle Perelli's safe at Dartleigh, hey? You're a quick wooer, Gregory."

"'Happy is the wooing——' Well, you know the rest."

"But there's a thundering lot I don't know, and that I think you ought to tell me, now. What has she to do with the scoundrel who was here last night, with Perelli's murder, and with Lincoln O'Hara? You might tell me her name first, then cut your teeth on those questions. I'll eat whilst you talk."

Melcombe considered, and decided to be quite frank.

"Here, to the caretaker and his wife she is Miss Martin; her real name is Madeline Westley."

"From the States?" asked Hamilton.

"I believe so."

"Know her people?"

"The father—by name. I hope to meet him here to-night."

"Name?"

"Horace G. Westley."

"Fe-fe-phew!" Hamilton whistled softly. "Horace G. Westley—dollar millionaire, and judge of the High Court."

"Is that so?" asked Melcombe with interest.

The other laughed. "Well to know something about your father-in-law-elect before you meet him." He ate in silence for a moment, then he said: "But the lady's parentage doesn't explain the mystery of her safe-breaking—you know she did try to get into Perelli's safe, old man! Nor does it explain why that beast Sacco should threaten to hang her."

"That's where your spokes rattle, Hamilton. It does. I'm going to tell you how—unofficially, mind, and I think I can leave the matter to your judgment. Here's the explanation."

He gave the story of the envelope briefly but vividly, and before he had finished Teddy Hamilton had set down his knife and fork, and was staring at him in open amazement. At the end he broke out:

"But what in thunder does it all mean? What can be in that envelope that Madeline Westley can turn burglar to get it, and Lincoln O'Hara or one of his crowd murder Perelli to the same end, whilst that devil Sacco creeps into your room and would kill you to possess it?"

"I don't know."

"And Westley's coming here for that envelope, to-night?"

"He is coming here—why, I don't know. But he will get the envelope right enough, as soon as I can retrieve it."

"Um! I'd give a shilling to know the contents," said Hamilton thoughtfully. "They must be interesting from the efforts made to get hold of them."

"Efforts seem likely to continue."

"Yes. Those two out on the moor must be on this particular business."

"Was one of them Sacco?"

"I don't know. But either they recognized me or knew that Lord Bobby was your chum. Anyhow, they're there and we're here; and as it seems to me, we're going to be bottled up here, if we're not careful. House isn't on the telephone, I suppose?"

"No."

"And Railton doesn't know where I am," said the other thoughtfully.

"How did you get here at all?" asked Melcombe.

"Got wind from Railton to keep an eye on Sacco. I followed him towards Paddington, but lost him on the way owing to a punctured tyre. Went on to the station and made inquiries. Got on his track again and found he'd taken the West of England train. I looked like coming to a full stop there, but I found a porter who had sent a telegram for him. Got the telegram. It was cryptic enough. Just two words—'Dunster. Inquire.' It was

sent to Monaci at one of the Palace hotels. I didn't worry about him. Sacco was Railton's man, and I started for Dunster with a swift car. I had luck. I saw Sacco confabbing with a chauffeur at the Luttrell Arms, and I had a talk with the fellow too. He was on his way back to Bristol, having driven a couple to some lonely place name of Shapgate; and the foreigner had been interested and had offered him double fare to carry him to the place. Chauffeur wasn't having any, said the mist was coming down on the moor, and with night falling a man would be risking his neck to take the job. I thought once of making straight here in the car; but changed my mind when I saw the fog swirling down Dunster street. It wasn't good enough, and as Sacco was on the moor, I went out to try and hire a trap, for a horse can keep the road when a car will run into a ditch. I didn't get the trap, but I got a lift part way in a farmer's waggon that was going beyond Cutcombe, and I hoofed the rest of the way—the deuce of a walk, for when it fell dark I only knew where I was going by the feel of the road under my feet.

"I went wrong at a forking of the roads, and found out the mistake at an inn—The Dog and Goose—two miles on. I rested there a little while, and whilst I was drinking hot toddy, fate sent Sacco along on a bicycle, if you please. He'd made the same mistake as I had and had taken the wrong fork. I saw him in the passage and had a notion that he hadn't spotted me; though last night, when he

shot at me whilst I was looking through the window there, I changed my mind. He went off on the cycle—a precarious business, and I followed back to the fork of the road on foot; being mortal sure that, once he was on the open moor, the cycle wouldn't be much use to him.

"I was right there. He abandoned it less than a mile from the fork, and I found it by the smell of the carbide, the fellow having blown out the light without turning off the tap. I tried it without a light, but came near breaking my neck in a ditch; and I left it where I fell and paddled on again. Centuries after, as it seemed, I heard somebody thundering on a door in the darkness a little in front of me, and I was in time to see that door opened and to hear the sweet nasal tones of the American demanding a room. The place was an inn——"

"I know. I was there when Sacco arrived."

Hamilton laughed. "On the spot always. Your star's a lucky one, Gregory. . . . But you can conceive me, wet with the fog, chilled to the bone, staring at that shut door, condemned to a night in the open, whilst that damned Italian snuggled warm in the blankets ——"

"But he didn't. He knew I was there. He interviewed me with an automatic, and combed my room for that envelope."

"That so? Of course, I'd no notion of that; and I sought a haystack, which wasn't so comfortable as it sounds. I didn't sleep,

and I heard the inn door open, and somebody step out into the night. I guessed Sacco—but wasn't sure, and in a tick I was out of that hay and following the footsteps I could hear up the road. Then the fellow who owned the feet went wrong. He stepped into a ditch. I heard the water splash and caught his swear. Americans have a sweet way of saying 'Hell!' when annoyed, and I recognized Sacco's voice; and when he recovered the terra-firma I followed on. I lost him for good farther up; but guessing that he was making for this place, I kept on. I overshot the mark, and must have gone the best part of half a mile before I guessed the truth. I turned back and hugging the side of the wood found the gate there, and later saw the light in the window; and was nosing there, amazed to death at seeing you, when Sacco let off that gun of his. . . . What followed you know, excepting that when I went off after Sacco last night I got away from the road, and have been exploring Exmoor in the fog ever since, but for two hours' sleep in bracken that was drier than the rest of the blame wilderness. . . . I was relieved to death when I saw Bobby Medway in that car, for I was too done up to do more than crawl. . . . And there's my whole yarn, and if you'll go talk to Bobby, I'll have another whack at the cheese as a prelude to the adventures to come, if those fellows are on the moor and mean business. A full stomach makes a stout heart, I find."

Melcombe left him with the cheese and went out to find Medway, discovering him half-way

up a tree, from which perch he could command the moor beyond the wall.

"Those sparks out there still," he volunteered; "and there's another away on the right there. I saw him just now." He laughed cheerfully. "I scent liveliness in the air, old cock."

"Yes. There is a tang of it," answered Melcombe. "But there's a better look-out place than that perch of yours, Bobby, and one where you're not so likely to be potted. If you'll descend to earth——"

"Coming, my son."

He slid down from the tree, and Melcombe led him to the house and to the upper window which he himself had used for a look-out place.

"We shall see better from here, and can talk whilst we watch."

"There's the rear of the house," began Bobby. "To let the enemy get behind you unnoticed——"

"There is a walled garden, with the caretaker of this place working there. I put him on that three hours ago. He'll give notice of trespassers, so we need not worry about the rearward. . . . You got my telegram yesterday?"

"I did, just when I was near breaking my teeth with gnashing them at you. . . . What made you desert me when you left Marie in such a tearing hurry?"

"I had to catch a train at Paddington, Madame having information that Miss Westley was travelling by it. Hadn't a second to

spare. . . . But what took you to the bun-shop ? ”

“ Sadie ! ” laughed Bobby. “ She was in the street watching Marie et Cie as if her long-lost hubby was there. I guessed she was shadowing us, and I climbed to that upper window to watch. She saw me go, and I fancy it put her in something of a quandary. Divided heart, you know, but finally she hailed a taxi and tried to follow you. I hailed another and followed her. She lost you, but I kept up the chase of the lady, and saw her exchange views with Lincoln O'Hara, who seemed a little disturbed, after which I mooned about until your wire came, then went off after the Alvis. The repairs weren't finished and I made a late start, and was hung up for the night by fog at Bampton ; whilst most of to-day I've been dodging about the moor looking for this house which seems to be unknown—— By Jove ! Look ! There's a car coming along. Wonder if it has anything to do with our friends ? ”

The car was coming from the direction of Dunster, at a moderate pace, and as far as they could see it held no one but the driver—a woman. They watched it intently, and suddenly Lord Bobby laughed.

“ I'll lay you five to one that woman is Sadie.”

Melcombe did not take the offer. He had a suspicion that it might be so himself ; and as the car neared the house he followed its approach with mounting interest. As the car neared and passed the gate he made the recognition.

"It is Sadie."

"I've half a mind to go after her and have a chat," laughed Bobby. "If I were sure I should not be *de trop*——"

"You would be. See, the car is stopping, and one of those fellows is running towards it. I wonder if the woman brings news?"

"What news is there to bring?" asked Lord Bobby. "You are here, and Hamilton, and Miss Westley and myself. And there's that precious envelope here as well. The circle is complete from this point of view, I imagine."

"No," answered Melcombe slowly. "The circle is not complete. There is one yet to come——"

"My sacred aunt, yes, of course—Horace G. Westley! There's room for a whole bundle of news there, hey?"

"Yes. If they know that this place is a rendezvous, or have news of him that we haven't got, he may have difficulty in getting here."

"They'll keep him out, you think?"

"I believe they'll do anything for those papers. One of them—O'Hara—killed Perelli in order to get them. They've taken big risks, and they won't stop at taking others. We've no means of getting into touch with Westley, and if he comes to-night, all unsuspecting, those scoundrels can gather him like a wayside flower; and then drive a bargain for the papers."

Lord Bobby whistled thoughtfully, and then commented:

"They've sure got us with a leg up, there!" He looked in the direction of the car, where the woman was talking with the man who had hurried to meet her. "I'd give a goodish sum to be able to listen-in to that conversation. I expect it would be revealing."

"Yes, but the privilege is denied us." Melcombe looked thoughtful for a moment and then spoke his thought aloud. "They won't let Westley come here if they know that he is due, and it's a moral certainty they won't let any of us go out to get help."

"I'm willing to try," responded Lord Bobby cheerfully. "With the Alvis one might make a break. And once really started——"

"No good! They'd pot the tyres, or plug the petrol tank. You wouldn't get a hundred yards. But there is a way, I think. Just keep a bright look out, Bobby, whilst I go talk to Hamilton."

"About the way you mentioned?"

"Yes! . . . They won't let any of us through, I'll swear, but they might let old Snowe through, if he appeared to be going about his lawful occasions, say driving sheep as I first saw him yesterday."

"By Jove! There's a chance there, if the man can be persuaded; and anyhow it would test the purpose of those scoundrels."

"Yes. . . . Tried openly in daylight it might come off. . . . I'll see Hamilton at once."

Leaving Medway on the look out, he went down to the dining-room. Hamilton was still

at the table, but his chin was on his chest and he was sound asleep. Remembering what a night his friend must have spent, Melcombe was loath to waken him, but did so ; and after the first shake, Hamilton straightened up and yawned prodigiously.

" A full man," he grinned, " is a sleepy one. It's a rule with me to relax after lunch. I forgot to tell you. What's up ? "

Melcombe explained what was in his mind. The inspector listened attentively, and approved.

" You're right, of course. We're bottled up —if those fellows mean business ; and if I know the tribe, they do. The Cicero district of Chicago induces a contempt for law ; and this house was built for the job they're on. They could shoot us all up and nobody would know. Only Railton would guess the truth ; and he might not hear for a week. . . . If the caretaker man has his flock handy it might be worth making a trial. I would give him a note for the local dicks and before dark there might be a cordon round that crowd."

" Write the note. I'll go and talk to Snowe ! "

He made his way to the walled garden where Snowe was working as if there were nothing the least unusual in the wind, and explained the situation to the man, who listened phlegmatically to the proposal.

" Ee want me to drive the sheep to Dunster, an' deliver a note to the policeman ? "

" No need to take the sheep all the way. If you can get clear you can leave the sheep ;

or if you can get as far as The Stag, get the innkeeper to take the note. He has a trap, I daresay."

"He'd ride—as I might. Pony be used to herding sheep."

"Well, if you'll try——"

"When be I to start?" asked the man tersely.

"The sooner the better."

"Then I'll go saddle up. There'm a bunch of sheep in the paddock—them I brought in yesterday."

"Very well! I'll fetch the note. But understand there is no call to take risks. If those blackguards turn you back, you obey without protest. That is understood."

"Ess!"

Melcombe went back to the house for the note, and on his return found the man with pony saddled, and with his dog shepherding the small flock to the gate. He handed over the note and gave a final instruction.

"Wait until I get back to the house; and then, above all, don't hurry. Go out as naturally as you can; but if you should be molested, don't persist in going on. Come back. That is clear?"

"Zo clear as daylight, zur."

Melcombe returned to the house, and accompanied by Hamilton joined Lord Bobby at the look-out window. The woman in the car was still talking to the man who had joined her. But for them the road was empty; and of the other men there was no sign. They watched

the road tensely. A dog barked, a gate clashed, and then into view came a huddle of sheep with the dog snapping at their heels, and old Snowe hunched on his pony, which ambled along at the pace of the sheep—the most natural thing in the world.

Nothing happened. The man and the woman out on the road continued their conversation; and the moor bordering the road remained empty of life.

"My hat!" cried Bobby enthusiastically. "The old boy is going to get away with the business. Those fellows must be the most infernal duffers."

It did appear that Snowe and his sheep were to go free. The little cavalcade ambled slowly on down the road. Neither Sadie nor her companion took any notice of it, and the face of the moor remained blank. A hundred yards was covered, two hundred, and still there was no sign of opposition. Then all three men were startled by a voice behind them.

"What is it? What are you watching?"

Melcombe momentarily lost interest in the silent drama outside, as he swung round to find Madeline, very wan, a dark bruise on her temple, with deep shadows under her eyes, which at the moment were bright with curiosity.

"My dear——" he began protestingly, with a thought that she ought still to be a-bed. But the girl cut in quickly:

"Something is happening? Tell me."

Melcombe made room at the window, and

pointed to Snowe still ambling along behind the sheep.

"We are trying a little experiment, or perhaps I should say adventure. Snowe has a note for the police at Dunster. If he gets through—— Ah!"

The unmistakable crack of a pistol had broken on his words. One of the sheep jumped and, rolling over, lay kicking in the road. The dog which had been barking at the heels of the flock suddenly cowed, slunk behind his master, who looked down on the fallen sheep, and with quite amazing coolness continued on his way.

"My God!" whispered Hamilton sharply. "If he disregards the warning, they'll shoot the brave old fellow as like as——"

"But they must not! Oh, they must not!" cried Madeline a little distraughtly. "It would be too wicked. We must stop them."

"Steady, my dear," said Melcombe. "Snowe has strict instructions to take no risks. As like as not he will turn back if——"

"There's a fellow moving towards the road," interjected Lord Bobby— "with an ultimatum, I'll bet. See, he's hailing the old boy, who is stopping and sending the dog to hold the sheep."

The caretaker had pulled up the pony; the dog, obedient to instructions, was rounding the flock against the bank; whilst the man who no doubt was responsible for the shot that had killed the sheep was crashing through the bracken. The man reached the road, and halted a couple of yards from Snowe, who sat on the pony apparently arguing with the

fellow. For perhaps a minute nothing happened, then the man on foot pointed in the direction of Shapgate, and the hand he used held a pistol. Melcombe held his breath. It was clear that the old man was receiving peremptory instructions to return, and knowing the character of the man with whom he was dealing, Melcombe almost prayed that he would not be stubborn. Not until the man with the pistol stepped back, and the dog evidently on instructions set the sheep in motion on the backward way, did Melcombe breathe easily; and when the pony turned and began to follow the sheep, it was Bobby Medway who broke the strained silence.

"That settles it! They mean to bottle us up here, and we're in a state of siege."

CHAPTER XV

A TRYING VIGIL

HAMILTON and Lord Bobby hurried downstairs to meet the returning man, and as they went a little cry broke from Madeline Westley. She looked at Melcombe with tragic eyes, and whispered tremulously:

"My father!"

"Yes?" asked her lover, guessing what was in her mind.

"If we cannot . . . leave here; he—he cannot enter!"

"That does not follow," answered Melcombe, more with the idea of reassuring her than because he really believed it. "If they know he is coming——"

"They know everything apparently!"

"No, they don't. They don't know where that envelope is hidden, which is one up to us. But as I was saying, if they know he is coming here, it may be policy on their part to let him enter. Then they would have us altogether in one place with, as they will be calculating, those papers in our possession."

"And then?"

The girl looked at him searchingly, waiting

for his answer. Melcombe decided for candour. He shrugged his shoulders.

"Heaven knows. I gather those fellows are from Chicago——"

"Yes! Yes!"

"The gangster type; and one knows what they would do in their native heath. Here things may be different. They may feel the necessity for caution——"

"They killed Perelli!" she interjected.

"True! But you must consider. If I had not happened along that would have been just a very mysterious crime. That friend of Hamilton's might have had his suspicions, but probably he would have been unable to prove anything."

"But this house is more lonely than Dartleigh!"

"Yes. And to be candid, there's the rub! Anything may happen. There's no getting away from that. They may attack the house, but I think it is fairly certain they won't do it in daylight."

"And if they should—in the dark, I mean?"

"Well, there are three of us here—four with Snowe. I think we should be their match."

The girl considered, then her thoughts swung back to the starting-point of the conversation.

"But my father! He is the real trouble. He will not know those men are here. He may walk straight into their arms. And we shall be able to do nothing except yield to their demands."

"My dear," said Melcombe quietly, "don't

worry over things that may never happen. We haven't come to that bridge yet, and we may never have to cross it. There's always the luck of the game to take into account, and it may be with us, you know."

"Oh, I pray it may. Those men——"

She broke off, and Melcombe glanced through the window. What he saw was interesting enough. The car which had brought Sadie was still stationary; and on the running-board two men were seated, apparently having an alfresco meal. Whilst he watched the woman handed a glass to one of the men, who held it to the light in the approved fashion, then brought it to his lips and apparently drained it, for a moment later he passed it back to the woman. Melcombe found himself smiling at the irony of the situation. The scene on which he looked was apparently the most innocent in the world. Any pedestrian, or the occupants of any car that might chance to come along the road, would not give two glances at those men taking a meal picnic-fashion at the side of the road. But were there only two men? He thought of the Alvis still in front of the house. Would it be possible to make a break? He surveyed the moor carefully; and on the other side of the house saw a trilby hat just lifted above the bracken at a point that commanded the road. No doubt it belonged to the fellow who had shot the sheep, and turned old Snowe back.

But a rush might do it. The more he considered, the more feasible did the thing seem.

Lord Bobby would jump to take the chance, and might be well on his way to Dunster and the end of a telephone wire before that car could turn and follow.

His eyes kindled at the thought. He turned to Madeline.

"My dear, I must go down to the others. I have an idea."

Lord Bobby was in the paddock talking to Snowe, and Hamilton was on the steps watching the gate. To him Melcombe hurried, and began to explain his plan. He had got but a little way when the inspector checked him.

"Sniff the air, old man."

Melcombe obeyed him literally, and caught a faint odour of petrol.

"Ah!" he said with quick understanding.

"Yes! One of those shots got the tank when Medway ran the gauntlet. I was looking at it just now. There isn't a pint of juice left. So far as the car is concerned, we are just as marooned as ever."

"Seems so," agreed Melcombe. "Well, we're no worse off than we were. But it is a rum business that we should be held up like this in the middle of England."

Hamilton looked round and gave a short laugh.

"The place was made for it. When John Shapgate, Esquire, built it, his soul wasn't prophetic enough to vision Chicago gangsters. Those fellows out there will stick at nothing. If they'd a machine-gun they'd spray us good and proper. As it is they're likely to burn

the place over our heads. . . . Then there's Westley. They may get him."

"Possibly. On the other hand they may not want him—only that confounded envelope."

"But they might hold him as a hostage, and compel the envelope to be given up in exchange. I'd give something to peep inside it."

"It is a private——"

"No! That's where you miss the step. It was stolen from Perelli's house, and apparently Perelli was murdered to facilitate the theft. . . . That makes it one of the documents in the case—you know. Police have a right to examine it."

"Well." Melcombe shrugged his shoulders and laughed. "You know where it is. . . . You've only got to go and get it. . . . I'm going to talk to Snowe."

He crossed over to the place where Lord Bobby and Snowe were still talking and addressed the caretaker.

"What happened, Snowe?"

"Well, zur, ee zaw that brute shoot thic poor creature that never done a soul on this earth no harm, no doubt?"

"Yes, I saw that."

"'Twas meant to warn me, I guessed, but I kep' going; till that fellow with the pistol appeared, an' told me to hop back zo fast as the pony could go. I tried to argify with en, but he just waved the pistol an' zaid he was goin' to count vive, an' if I wasn't movin' by then I wouldn't move no more. The beggar

meant it too, zo I just turned an' brought the sheep back, there being nothing else to do."

"No, you did very well," answered Melcombe heartily.

"But what be us to do now, zur? Them rapscallions havin' the whip hand ov us."

"We've got to talk that over, Snowe. . . . Just keep an eye on that south wall, will you?"

"Right, zur."

Melcombe and Lord Bobby returned to Hamilton. He greeted them cheerfully.

"Plan of campaign?" he said. "A masterly inactivity, hey? Make the other crowd move, and then let fly for all we're worth."

"Right," said Lord Bobby. "But if they don't move—what?"

"Just got to watch and wait and take the chances," answered the inspector. "Someone must come along this road some time, and then we can start such a racket that whoever he is he will report it at the next village, and somebody will investigate. Failing that, come night, one of us will have to crawl through their lines and get help."

"Might all crawl through—and leave 'em with the cradle," laughed Lord Bobby.

"But not until Westley arrives," said Melcombe. "Madeline would refuse to leave."

"Confound the fellow! . . . There is no saying when he will come or whether he will come at all! And we're to sit here twiddling our thumbs until he does."

"I wonder if those fellows know that he is expected," remarked Hamilton thoughtfully.

"Miss Westley says they can't possibly know. The place was taken secretly in the name of Martin through a friend."

"But they know the girl is here; and they may be following Westley from the other end, and may shepherd him all the way."

"Yes; there are possibilities there. But the question is—do they want Westley or that envelope of his?"

"If I know anything about the business, if they get one they'll get the other. I wish Railton was here, he might know something that would help us to act. As it is, we've just got to hang on and hope for the best."

The best did not seem very promising. Sitting with Madeline at the upper window, Melcombe saw the car with the woman in it depart; but noted that the men remained strategically disposed around the house, out of gun-shot, and sufficiently near to intervene in the event of any move on the part of those within; and once he caught a flash which he thought proclaimed that one of the men must have a field-glass. Meditating on the situation, a thought came to him which moved him to ask a question.

"Madeline, did your father send you to Perelli's house to get that envelope?"

"Oh, no! That was my own idea. He had been much worried, and he told me that there was deep trouble ahead if he could not secure certain papers. I pressed him for particulars, and he said that a certain man Perelli had them, and that others meant to get possession

of them. . . . That was at home, and as I was coming to England I made inquiries, because Perelli was a notorious man. Friends told me that it was owing to my father's action that he was driven out of America; and that he was settled in England. They told me other things also."

"Yes?" he said encouragingly.

"Well, that there were rumours that Perelli had a means of ruining my father utterly, and that there were men in Chicago who meant to get hold of Perelli and compel him to act in order to save a certain man from going to the electric chair."

"But I do not understand how that——"

"Oh! I do not understand it myself!" cried the girl. "There is so much that is mysterious. But I am afraid that it means disgrace for . . . for my father. . . . There was a story that one man had offered two hundred and fifty thousand dollars for those papers, but because the man most concerned was a rival of Perelli's he would not sell, or act to save him."

Melcombe whistled thoughtfully. "Then those men out there may be after that money, as they certainly are after those papers."

"Yes. I think so; and I think my father tried to buy the papers from Perelli, for one morning there came a letter which upset him very much. . . . I . . . I . . . managed to see that letter." Madeline flushed a little and Melcombe understood that she had done so without her father's knowledge. "It was

just a scrawl. 'You can take your dollars to hell, Judge. I keep the papers, but I'll send them to the Press when the time comes to trump the game.' Father was very depressed after that, and then quite suddenly said he was following me to England, and made arrangements to take this house."

"Has he taken it for long?"

"Three months! But he must be back in Chicago in a fortnight. . . . I can't understand why he should have decided to come here at all."

Melcombe himself had a dim idea. It was possible that Westley, hard pressed, had determined on some desperate move to save himself, and had designed to use this lonely house to that end. But how? Had it been in his mind to inveigle Perelli to visit him here, or had he meant to use it as a base, hiding himself whilst he struck at the man who was proposing in some way to ruin him? Men pushed to extremes were dangerous men, and Westley, occupying a distinguished public position, jealous perhaps of his reputation and harassed by the fear of disgrace, might very well be contemplating some drastic course. It was true that Shapgate was a long way from Dartleigh, but three hours in a fast car might cover the distance, and——

"Does Mr. Westley drive a car?" he asked suddenly.

"Yes! That is his one hobby. He is an expert on the road. Why?"

Melcombe kept the thought which had

prompted the question to himself, and offered another reason for it.

"Then to-night he will probably drive himself. I mean he will come alone!"

"Almost certainly, I think."

Melcombe stared out of the window, whistling thoughtfully, and wondering whether the suspicion that had occurred to him was the right one. If it were, the fact that Perelli was dead, which, if Westley read the papers, he was bound to know, must have thrown the man into a panic of apprehension. Whatever desperate scheme or wild hope he might have cherished was automatically squashed, and the man who would arrive at Shapgate some time in the night would be a man without hope. Well, he thought, the greater his relief when he knew that those precious papers were safe at The Stag.

He looked across the moor. Clouds were banking towards the west; and there was a little moan in the wind about the house. The two together indicated another change in the weather, and one that might be favourable to the man who by this was perhaps on his way.

"It is going to rain, presently," he said, "rain hard!" There was a little significance in his tones which Madeline noticed.

"Yes?"

"And hard rain on Exmoor is not to be despised, as those fellows out there will find. They'll have to seek cover somewhere, or quit."

"Oh, if they were to go that would be a blessed thing!"

"I don't suppose they will do that. They may shelter in the barn here, or the cow-shed. . . . I think I had better have a talk with the others. . . . The rain may mean much to us."

He left her at the window and went down to his friends, and after consultation they proceeded to fasten the doors of all possible sheltering places, leaving only an open cart-shed which it was impossible to close. The rain began before the task was concluded, a hard driving rain with wind behind it, and as they raced through it to the house, Lord Bobby chuckled:

"Damp the spirits? What! Those fellows will wish they had bootleg whisky before long. Might send 'em out an umbrella! It's unkind to leave them in the rain."

Time wore slowly on. Dusk fell, and just before it was quite dark, from his look-out at the upper window Melcombe saw the head-lights of a car flashing through the rain, coming from the direction of Dunster. He cried the news to the others, and Lord Bobby crept towards the gate to investigate, whilst Hamilton and he watched the coming car, with some excitement. Was it merely a car crossing the moor by this desolate road, or did it bring the expected man before he was due?

The car swept on, but a hundred yards or so from the house pulled up, and before the headlights were switched off they saw two figures slip through the rain and enter the car.

"Going!" cried Hamilton.

"No. There's the umbrella Bobby suggested.

One of them must have gone for it—to The Stag, I expect." The headlights went off, then the sidelights, but there was still a small glimmer within the car, from the dashboard, as Melcombe guessed. It was some time before Lord Bobby returned, and when he did he was dripping, but cheerful.

"Been to spy out the land! . . . There are four men in that car. They were reading a telegram. I expect number four brought it along." He chuckled to himself. "I could have potted the lot, if Hamilton hadn't been here to witness against me. As it was I did the next best thing."

"What is that?" asked Melcombe.

"Gently punctured the two back tyres," he laughed. "They'll go down gradually and that crowd will never notice."

"You think that was wise?" asked Hamilton a little sharply. "There's old wisdom about making a bridge for a flying enemy."

"But this enemy isn't flying," objected Lord Bobby. "It doesn't mean to; and I've evened things up. When what d'you call him comes along in a car as expected, what's to prevent us slipping away, whilst those fellows bump on the rims?"

"Jerusalem! . . . That's an idea!" agreed Hamilton. "Only, I shan't slip away. One of that lot killed Perelli and I mean to get him."

"And I'll turn special," laughed Bobby. "You can swear me in Hamilton, whilst Gregory goes off with the lady. I wouldn't miss the fun for worlds."

The rain rattled on the windows like hail, the wind wuthered noisily, and all other sounds were drowned. With the front of the house in darkness, those within kept vigil whilst two hours went slowly by. Old Snowe watched the rear of the house, and whilst Hamilton and Lord Bobby divided their time between the rooms on the ground floor Melcombe sat with Madeline at the upper window, staring into the rainy darkness for the glare of head-lights that would announce the coming of the man for whom they waited.

Down the road there was that very faint illumination which proclaimed the presence of those others who also waited—as Melcombe was now convinced—for Westley's advent. Their apparent inactivity left him in little doubt of that. Such a night, had they meant to attack the house, was an opportunity not to be missed. They might be at the door or the windows before anyone could possibly see them, and the fact that they made no move was very significant. He remembered the tele-gram which Bobby declared they had been reading—a telegram no doubt brought by that fourth man, and found confirmation of his suspicion there. They had received news which made them content to remain inactive; and what that news was he had no doubt whatever.

The strain of waiting grew intolerable; the darkness and the silence, broken only by the wind and rain, had an odd subduing effect on the mind; and when Madeline or himself spoke it was in whispers. Presently the continued

suspense begot in Melcombe a sense of impending calamity; he found himself visioning tragic possibilities, and was aware of an increasing oppression of spirit which amounted to sheer foreboding. That the girl's more sensitive spirit was the prey of the like apprehensions he had proof when, after a long period of silence, she unexpectedly shivered.

"Cold, Madeline?" he asked.

"No . . . not cold!" she replied in a tremulous whisper. "I am . . . deadly afraid."

"Afraid, my dear!"

"For . . . for my father."

The next moment she was in his arms shaken by sobs that she could not repress.

"Courage, my dear," he whispered. "You must not give way. Things always go better than one fears."

"It is the waiting . . . it gets on my nerves. If I were . . . were doing something——"

"I know," he said soothingly. "I have the same feeling. But for the moment we are condemned to inactivity. . . . We can only stare out of the window . . . and wait."

He himself was not staring out of the window at the moment. His eyes were on the white face so near his own. He could just see the dark eyes wide with strain, and when he kissed her he found her cheek wet with tears. That shook him more than anything else. He recalled her as he had seen her the first time in the darkness at Dartleigh taking risks with amazing coolness; and as he had seen her over his shoulder, pistol in hand, challenging,

as she thought, one who, to say the least, was a dangerous man ; and he was a little overcome by this sudden weakness—until he remembered that affection for her father had inspired that courage as now it kindled fears.

" But it is the long waiting——" She broke off as a grandfather clock downstairs began to chime, and lay quite still in his arms counting the strokes. " Eleven," she whispered. " An age yet to——" Again she broke off, raised her head and looked into the night, then she gave a little cry.

" What is it ? " he whispered quickly.

" The light . . . in that car . . . it has gone out."

Melcombe, who in his concern for her had almost forgotten the car, looked quickly through the window. It was as she said. The faint gleam which had served to indicate the position of the car was no longer visible. What did it portend ? Were those ruffians after all going to attack ? Or was there some other reason which had dictated the dousing of that light as a precautionary measure ?

He strained through the darkness seeking to locate the car, but failed. Three seconds later, however, he saw something else, which made his heart leap with sudden excitement. Away in the wet darkness was a great fan of light. He could not see the source of it yet, but he knew that in that solitude it could only come from the powerful headlights of a car moving along the road. He held his breath whilst he watched, and then half a mile away

at least saw the lamps in the wet gleaming more brightly than stars. Then he knew why that light in the waiting car had been doused. The men in it, more watchful than himself, had noted the approach of the other car before the girl had spoken, and were making ready for its coming.

"Madeline," he whispered quickly. "Those lights . . . out there! Your father comes! Remain here whatever happens. Now I must go and warn the others." He kissed her and whispered again: "Courage, my dear!"

Then he raced down the stairs to give warning to his friends.

CHAPTER XVI

THE COMING OF WESTLEY

LESS than a minute later all three were running to the gate through the soaking rain. When they reached it Lord Bobby swung it wide.

"Westley may need a quick passage," he said.

The car of the watchers was invisible in the rainy darkness, but once the sound of a voice reached them indistinctly; and once Melcombe could have sworn that he heard a laugh. That meant that those four men or some of them had left the car; and as suddenly he recalled his own experience with the wire stretched across the drive at Dartleigh, he was shaken by swift apprehensions.

Heavens! Why had he not thought of that?

He stepped out into the road. A turn farther down hid the oncoming car; but the fan of light quivering up in the darkness, and reflected by the rain-drops, proclaimed its swift approach.

"Stand by!" he whispered to the others. "There may be some damnable trick. I'm going down there to help in case of need."

"Oh, but I say, Powder——"

He slipped away into the darkness, leaving

Lord Bobby protesting. Of the exact whereabouts of the quartette he had no notion ; but in the rain and darkness he knew that he was fairly safe from discovery at least until the oncoming car made the turn and lit what was left of the road to Shapgate with its dazzling lamps. Even then, as he guessed, he was little likely to be seen. The ruffians ahead would never anticipate that anyone would leave the house, and all their attention would be given to the car.

"But if there is wire——"

He whispered the words as he ran on, keeping to the rough grass of the moor. Then he found deliverance from his fear. This open moorland road was not like the approach to Dartleigh. Trees there were none ; and so the means to fix the deadly trap was absent. But there were other ways. A piece of rock in the way, an obstruction to force a sudden swerve from the metalled road to the uneven tussocks, half a dozen ways that might bring the racing car to a sudden and disastrous stop. Another thought leaped in his mind. Those men were armed. They might use their weapons. A bullet through the wind-screen or a lucky shot at a tyre and there would be a catastrophe. In that moment it seemed to him that the life of Horace G. Westley was not worth three minutes' purchase, and he was assailed by a sharp sense of futility. He could do nothing to prevent the impending disaster. The thing was fated. Utterly beyond his power to avert.

He was still running when the car came round the bend of the road at a great pace, the glare of its lamps a blinding stream of light. For one second before the glare forced him to turn his head aside he saw outlined the figures of two men standing at the side of the road swinging some bulky thing in their hands, ready to throw, something in the nature of which he could not make out. But understanding their purpose he gave an involuntary shout of warning—utterly vain, as he knew, whilst yet the words were ringing.

Then the thing happened. The two men flung their bulky missile, and at the same time there was the flash of a pistol at the other side of the road. Melcombe saw the flash, but never heard the report. There was a sharp grinding of brakes desperately applied. The car—a saloon—bumped sharply, swerved madly, skidded, turned round twice, crashed into the other car standing in the road, lurched heavily and turned over with a sound of shivering glass.

Melcombe was still running, but now in a blinding darkness, for the lamps on the overturned car had gone out. He was nearer to the cars than the others; and he reached them first, taking a chance. He heard the ruffians coming, but was not deflected from his purpose.

"Stand back," he shouted, "or——"

A flashlight cut through the darkness and focussed itself upon him. He heard a man shout, and recognized Sacco's voice.

"That cursed whelp!"

He ducked his head to avoid the glare of the lamp, and again saw a pistol flash, this time hearing almost simultaneously the report and the whine of the bullet. He lifted the automatic which he had borrowed from Madeline, but he did not fire. He heard a stirring in the overturned car, and by the light of Sacco's lamp to his happy amazement saw the sunshine roof slide back, and a man crawl out.

"This way, Mr. Westley!" he fairly roared. "Quick—for heaven's sake."

The man whom he addressed stood upright, recognized a friendly voice, and began to stagger forward rather blindly. Melcombe caught his arm.

"Straight on!" he fairly shouted. "A hundred yards——"

There was a roar of angry voices behind them; the sound of pounding feet. The noise of running feet came from the front also. For a second he thought that they were intercepted, and he raised the pistol in his hand, prepared now to shoot. But out of the darkness came a swift hail.

"Co-oo-ee! Powder!"

Lord Bobby! His heart leaped with relief.

"Here, Bobby! . . . Keep the hunt back!"

His friend's laughter answered. A shadow appeared suddenly in front.

"Got our gentleman?"

"Yes! But behind——"

Lord Bobby laughed again. "My chance."

He fired a couple of shots. "Outers!" he chuckled as he ranged himself on Westley's

right. "Mere bird-scaring! But if they come —— Ah, would you, sonny? Well, there's a little dot for your eye."

A man had appeared unexpectedly at his right hand. Bobby changed his pistol to the left, and struck a terrific blow with his closed fist. The unfortunate recipient of the blow gave a grunt and crashed to the ground, and with his friend now between him and the pursuit Melcombe hurried the newcomer forward. They reached the gate to the sound of shots, whether from Bobby or the pursuers, Melcombe could not tell. He thrust Westley forward.

"Straight up the drive. You'll find Madeline waiting." He turned back; saw Hamilton with Snowe's shot-gun in his hand.

"Get ready to dust them, Teddy. As soon as Bobby is through the gate. I'm going to close it. . . . Ready! Here he comes! . . . And the others——"

Lord Bobby, a little short of breath, staggered through the gate. Instantly Melcombe flung it forward, heard it latch; and then caught a flash as Hamilton, firing low, let off the gun. Something very like a howl of pain followed, and Lord Bobby laughed.

"Winged someone, Hamilton! You'll be charged for that."

"Get to the house," cried Hamilton, and all three fled up the short drive.

Not until the door was closed behind them did anyone slacken pace, then as they halted in the hall, now dimly lit by a candle, Melcombe looked round.

"Hot work!" he gasped.

"Yes, but we got our man!" commented Hamilton.

"And those birds are left lamenting. What?" laughed Lord Bobby. "My stars! What a chance to learn the language of Chicago we're missing."

"Better put out the light!" warned Melcombe. "Last night Sacco was shooting through the letter-slit. He may try the trick again."

Hamilton stretched a hand and extinguished the candle with his finger and thumb, then for a little while the trio stood listening. Somewhere in the house there was a sound of voices, speaking quickly; but outside the only sound was that of the swishing rain. Bobby Medway whispered cheerfully:

"Front line on its way back to the dressing station, I guess, to repair damages. Hamilton is in for a charge of unlawful wounding."

"Oh, shut up, Bobby, and listen."

Again they listened, and Melcombe tiptoeing to the door set his ear against it. There was no sound to indicate that the men outside were continuing hostilities, and the irrepressible Bobby gave his opinion.

"A retreat. What? Or shall we say a bally run? They've had enough and——"

"No!" interjected Hamilton. "Don't you believe that. Those men can't afford to quit the game now. This is England, not Chicago. They will know if they withdraw the police will be at their heels in two hours. And apart

from the unlawful proceedings here, there is the Dartleigh crime to be explained. One of them certainly is responsible for Perelli's death, and he won't be anxious to pay up. They're just tied to go on; and there'll be ructions shortly. Better go up to the landing window, Bobby. I'll watch the front here, and Melcombe can——"

"I'm going to interview Westley!" broke in Melcombe. "I think that is desirable."

"Well, perhaps——"

Melcombe was already on his way to the rear of the house, whence came the sound of voices. In the kitchen he found Madeline and her father, the latter with a cut in his face which the girl was endeavouring to staunch. The man looked inquiringly at Melcombe, and Madeline quickly explained.

"Mr. Melcombe, my father."

Horace G. Westley extended a hand. "My saviour, I understand. But for you, young sir, I should unquestionably have been in those ruffian's hands. I shall never cease to be grateful. Believe me, to my dying gasp I shall remember your valour on my behalf."

Melcombe had a swift feeling of discomfort. The hand that he took was clammy and cold, and as he met the other's eyes he saw in them a light of cool calculation, and had instantly an intuitive dislike of the man.

"Pleased to have served you, sir," he answered brusquely.

The other ignored the tone, and went on more fulsomely:

"Served! Most handsomely, Mr. Melcombe. Not only have you delivered me from the hands of my enemies, but you have, I understand, saved what I treasure more than life."

"Indeed, sir."

"I refer to my reputation as a just and honourable man, which every right-feeling individual sets before even his physical salvation. 'Who steals my purse steals trash.' You know your Shakespeare—our Shakespeare, I should say, for he is ours as he is yours—*our* Shakespeare, as always, says the true thing. A man's good name is more than the treasure of the Incas, part of himself, of the essential soul and——"

Melcombe felt himself growing dazed. This spate of words seemed to be exercising a hypnotic effect; but underneath the dislike he felt for the man was growing fast as Jonah's gourd. He was annoyed that it should be so, and had a feeling that there was a mistake somewhere, that this fulsome, gushing man who talked as hypocrites talked could not possibly be the father of that white girl whose face seemed to indicate something of his own discomfort. The fellow talked like a ranting pulpiteer, and—— His thought was checked by a question that was sharp as a pistol-shot.

"You have that envelope handy?"

"Why, no——"

He got no further. The man's smooth glibness went completely by the board. A look of utter consternation came on his face.

"My God!" he demanded harshly. "You have not lost it?"

Melcombe resented the tone in which the other addressed him; but held his resentment in check.

"No. It is in a safe place."

"Here?" The man looked round as he snapped the words. "Get it."

"Not here! It is hidden at an inn a mile or so down the road."

His explanation deepened the other's consternation. He seemed to lose complete control of himself.

"God Almighty, you had it in your hands and you left it there? What a fool's trick! Those ruffians will find it; and I shall be undone. You have delivered me into their hands. . . . Why in perdition's name didn't you hang on to it?"

"Father!"

The girl's voice broke in on this tirade, protesting, imploring, and looking at her Melcombe saw the shame in her eyes. The sight of that checked the rising wrath within him. He tried to make allowances for the man, as one hard beset, who sees the salvation that had been so near snatched from his grasp. But before he could speak, Westley was off again.

"Forgive me, young sir. I am distraught. You did not know, of course. I ought to have remembered that. Nevertheless, I am a man undone! Undone!"

He made a gesture of despair and, throwing himself into a chair, buried his face in his hands.

The blood from the cut in his face trickled down his fingers and ran into his sleeve, but he seemed oblivious of it. Melcombe stared at him helplessly and with secret amazement. The man had not lacked courage in the moment when his car had crashed; but now he had gone all to pieces apparently.

"Father, you are assuming——" began the girl, only to be checked by a groan, and another bemoaning cry.

"A lost man! . . . Better those men outside had shot me!"

"But, sir," began Melcombe, trying to keep the contempt out of his voice, "there is no need for this. That envelope is quite safe where those fellows will never think of looking for it."

"You do not know them," broke in the other. "I would have wagered my salvation a month ago that but one man knew of those papers, and now here these scoundrels are on the track of them. And you had them in your hands!" Again there was a gesture of despair. "To-night I shall shoot myself. . . . It is the only way."

"Father," cried the girl beseechingly, and turned a white face to Melcombe. "Do you . . . mind leaving us for a little while?"

Melcombe flashed a glance of sympathy, and turning on his heel, left the room. Outside the door, he swore softly to himself.

"Of all the infernal humbugs," he muttered, "there's the winner!"

He stood in the darkness, not listening, but aware of the low pleading note of Madeline's voice on the other side of the door. After all

that had happened he was experiencing a revulsion of feeling in regard to Horace G. Westley that was almost overwhelming. Except as the father of Madeline and as a factor in the coil into which he had stumbled, he had scarcely thought of the man at all; but to discover him in character was a startling thing. The sound of a groan came to him, and he heard the girl cry out, her voice raised in distress:

"But, father, you must not. Oh, think——"

"The d——d hypocrite!" muttered Melcombe fiercely. "I'd like to shake his tongue out."

He had read Horace G. Westley very clearly. The man's oily volubility had been rather nauseating; but the cool, calculating appraisement of himself, and that one fierce outburst, had been a revelation. Behind the smoothness was a man utterly selfish; and one who was perhaps not so careful of his honour as his prating about it might have indicated. That he wanted the envelope hidden under that drawer at the inn, and wanted it badly, was clear; but there was no need for the heroics in which he was indulging; and which could mean nothing but distress to Madeline. He heard her cry out again, pleading; and, cursing the man in his heart, was on the point of entering the room, when the door opened and the girl came out.

"My dear——" he began.

"Not now!" she cried, quivering. "Please! I cannot endure more!"

She passed him swiftly and hurried up the

stairs. He remained where he was, thinking that presently she would return, and he would have the opportunity of consoling her. She was longer than he expected. From the kitchen he caught the clink of glass and surmised that Horace G. Westley was seeking to fortify himself against trouble to come. Outside there was no sound but the swish of the rain ; and it came to him suddenly that for the last few minutes he had completely forgotten the men out in the night. The real relation between them and the man on the other side of the kitchen door he had no means of knowing, but from his brief acquaintance with Madeline's father he surmised that there was not much to choose between them. They might be ruffians ; at least they were not hypocrites to whine about honour and harrow a girl's soul with threats of suicide, that as he was sure would never materialize. Why the blazes did the man talk in that fashion ?

He was still wondering that when he caught a light step on the stairs. He waited a little breathlessly. He had no doubt that it was Madeline and before she entered the kitchen again he would speak to her, whisper comfort, and assure her of his sympathy. It was quite dark where he stood, as in the hall, and he heard her groping her way cautiously, uncertainly, with, as it seemed, a caution that was not called for.

Then she blundered straight into his arms, gave a little startled gasp, and he began to whisper reassuringly :

" Madeline, my dear——"

He broke off almost as soon as he began. The girl had on a leather motoring coat. Deliberately he lifted a hand as if to stroke her hair. She wore a hat. She was intending to go out, and it came to him suddenly why Horace G. Westley had indulged in despairing talk. He had been playing on his daughter's feelings, deliberately provoking her to desperate action. A cold rage shook Melcombe; for two pins he could have entered the kitchen and thrashed the man who could be so mean, but instead he demanded in a hoarse whisper:

"You are going out?"

"I . . . I must!"

"Why?"

There was a snap in his voice and he felt her quiver; then she whispered brokenly:

"You heard him? . . . That envelope! . . . I . . . I must get it—or . . . or . . ."

He had already divined the truth, but to hear it spoken made it seem incredibly fantastic. For a moment he was dumb, then he broke out ragingly:

"God curse the man! . . . He would have you go out in the teeth of the peril outside?"

"Oh!" the girl sobbed, "you mistake me! It is not his wish. It is my own. I . . . I suggested it."

That might be the truth, but Melcombe never doubted who had prompted the suggestion, and he answered harshly:

"You shall not go!"

He felt her stiffen in his arms at the words, but did not loose his hold.

"But I shall!" she said, and he was conscious of the clash of her will against his own. "What right have you to stop me?"

"I shall take it," he answered masterfully. "Any man would in such circumstances. It would be a crime to let you go."

"But he—— Oh, you do not understand ——"

"Better than you think," he interrupted. "Rather than that you should go out, I would throw him to those wolves outside."

He made no attempt to hide his savage contempt for Westley, it throbbed in his harsh whisper, and shook the girl more than he realized. A sob broke from her, another, and yet another, and as he realized suddenly the hurt she must be suffering, he was filled with compunction.

"My dear! . . . My dear! . . . Hush! . . . Don't . . . don't cry!"

"I . . . I . . ."

He had an inspiration. He had hurt her cruelly, though perhaps he was wholly justified. But he could atone and would.

"You shall not go," he said. "Not for worlds would I allow it. But your father shall have his precious envelope, to-night. . . . I will fetch it myself."

"But . . . but—oh-h!"

She was shaken by sobs, and wept on his shoulder; no longer hostile. He kissed her and whispered consoling words and presently heard her whisper:

"I am ashamed that you . . . that you

should go. But—but, father, he is distraught . . . and . . . and . . .”

“ I understand,” he answered mendaciously, wondering to himself what would be the aspect of Horace G. Westley if one could see through the closed door. Remembering the clinking glass, he conceived him as seated before the fire, not too distraught, and no doubt discovering the comforting properties of the brandy from Mrs. Snowe’s medicine chest. He could have laughed at the irony of the situation, but instead he spoke with light peremptoriness. “ Kiss me ; and go take off your outdoor things. I will explain to the others ; and then I will go. . . . After all, there is no one else so fitted for the job, since I hid the envelope, and know just where to find it.”

The girl did not even pretend to accept this very proper excuse.

“ Yes ! . . . But . . . you must not think I do not know the truth . . . why you go, I mean . . . I am ashamed to . . . to exploit ——”

“ Oh, the veil’s down ! ” he laughed cheerfully. “ Well, truth’s truth. I go because I love you, and we both know it. And here’s the seal to the knowledge.” He kissed her and released her. “ Now go ! And I will go too.”

He waited whilst she ascended the stairs, then he went to the hall, put on his coat and hat and sought out Hamilton.

“ I’m going out,” he said.

“ The deuce you are ! ” answered the other wonderingly.

"Yes. As far as The Stag Inn. Westley's crying out for that envelope, and won't be happy till he gets it."

"Let him cry till the cows come home. It's mere craziness to take the chances of the crowd outside after what's happened to-night."

"But the poor fellow——"

"Pooh! You mean that girl."

"Well, suppose I do?"

"Nothing!" The inspector laughed. "I can't stop you. It's your funeral, but you're sure taking something on."

"Not so much as you think, Hamilton. There's that south wall at the back of the house. I shall take that way and make a circuit——"

"And when you come back—if you do?"

"Same way. I'll knock five times on the side door, and you'll know to let me in."

"Nothing will stop you, I suppose."

"Nothing!"

"Then I won't argue with you. It's notorious that a man in love is as stupid as a mule. . . . I'll open the door for you."

They went to the side door together. Hamilton opened it cautiously and looked forth. There was nothing to be seen and the only sound was the splashing of the rain.

"All clear!" he whispered, and then added: "For heaven's sake take care of yourself, Melcombe. Don't let those brutes pot you—though in any case you're bound to get pneumonia! So long!"

And with the other's cheerful prophecy in his ears, Melcombe slipped through the doorway,

waited a moment, standing quite still in the teeming rain. Then assured that his leaving the house had gone unobserved, he set his face towards the rear gardens and the wall that was to be scaled, wondering whither the adventure would lead him, but vowing that at all costs when he returned he would carry Westley's precious envelope with him.

CHAPTER XVII

IN A LADY'S ROOM

HE found no difficulty in scaling the wall; and within ten minutes had made his circuit and had reached the road. Looking back, he saw a light flashing through the rain. It came from the point where Westley's overturned car lay; and as he waited for a moment he saw that the light moved to and fro as if the man who held it was busy at some task. Possibly he reflected his fellows had discovered the deflated tyres; and were making an endeavour to repair the damages, a task that in the foul weather and darkness would not be an easy one.

As he walked on, his mind again reverted to Horace G. Westley. Hamilton had said the man was a judge of some sort; but if he were that it was not to the credit of whatever authority had exalted him to that high seat. The fellow was a sweep. He had deliberately played on his daughter's feelings in order to prompt her to make the attempt to secure forthwith the envelope on which he set such store. Apart from the peril of such a proceeding, the darkness of the night was a sufficient reason for refraining from sending a girl on so long a

journey in the small hours; but neither consideration, it seemed, was of any account to Westley. He wanted that confounded envelope, and if by any means his daughter could be induced to go for the thing, those means were legitimate. He felt that he would like to kick the man, and at the moment he would not have cared twopence if Lincoln O'Hara and his friends had caught the fellow and worked their will on him.

He began to wonder if Westley had inspired the girl's visit to Dartleigh as he had moved her to the decision to go to the inn. It was more than possible; and there had been a reserve in Madeline's accounts which left room for the suspicion. He grew hot with anger at the thought; and his anger did not lessen as he walked on, reflecting that this uncomfortable journey was entirely unnecessary, and that the envelope for the time being was far safer than it would be whilst in transit from the inn to Shapgate. If on his return he encountered those men marching in the rainy night and any mishap occurred to him, Horace G. Westley might have cause to regret being in such a hurry to secure the confounded thing, and——

His thought was checked suddenly. Ahead of him in the darkness only a few yards away there had appeared a faint light—the light of a match held in cupped hands to shield it whilst a man lit a cigarette. He came to a standstill and watched. The light was extinguished suddenly, by the wind that wuthered over the moor, apparently, for a second match was

struck, and this time it appeared the man who had struck it achieved his object, for the match was flung aside, and was instantly extinguished by the wind.

There was someone ahead of him, Melcombe reflected; and that person could scarcely be other than one of the gang engaged in watching Shapgate; for Exmoor in the small hours of the morning was not a place where casual strangers would be abroad; still less any of its inhabitants. But where was the fellow going?

The answer to the question was not difficult. In all likelihood the unknown's destination was the same as his own—The Stag Inn. To speculate why he was going was a vain thing. He might be Sacco who had spent the previous night upon the moor and was feeling the need for rest; or again, the man whom Hamilton had peppered with the shot-gun, and who found it necessary to seek a refuge that he might repair damages. What mattered, thought Melcombe, was that there was a man ahead of him, going the same way, probably to the same place, and whom he must be careful not to overrun.

That consideration, when he resumed his way, dictated a slower pace. He could see nothing in the mirk and darkness, hear nothing but the swish of wind and rain, and if he moved quickly he might very easily find himself treading on the man's heels. As it was, he once found himself nearer than he had supposed himself to be, as was revealed to him when the man threw the stub of his cigarette away, and a single red spark showed through the darkness.

He fell back a few paces, but when they approached the inn and its white-washed wall showed through the rain, he shortened the distance between them again, and crouching against a wall, watched the man, who now was a shadowy figure against the white wall, approach the inn door. Would he arouse the innkeeper, or had the door been left on the latch for his return ?

The question was answered immediately. The man did not knock ; but opened the door forthwith, and, passing inside, reclosed it after him. Melcombe wondered if he had locked it, and in that case how he himself could obtain admission without rousing all the house, and so giving information of his call to the man who had just entered. It seemed to him that he might have to force an entry, somehow, but anyhow he would make no immediate move. Until the man who had passed into the inn was safe a-bed it would be folly to try to enter.

He had to wait a considerable time. A light appeared at an upper window, and burned so long that he suspected the fellow who used it of reading in bed—a reprehensible practice, he thought ; as with rain trickling down his neck he crouched closer to the wall, watching for the light to be extinguished.

The window grew dark at last, and taking out his watch he looked at the luminous dial. He would give the fellow a quarter of an hour to reach dreamland, and then make his attempt. That quarter of an hour seemed like a whole

æon. The rain increasing, his discomfort grew pronounced. He calculated that he had not six inches of dry skin anywhere; and as he found himself growing chilly, remembered Hamilton's prophecy about pneumonia; which certainly was being given a chance of fulfilment.

But the allotted time ended at last; and straightening himself, after brushing the drips from his eyes, he moved cautiously towards the inn door. When he reached it, he stood for a moment, looking up at the dark windows and listening, alert for any sign or movement within. Then he stretched his hand to the latch and pressed. The latch lifted and on pressure the door yielded, being almost flung from his grasp by the sudden draught created by the rush of the wind.

Swiftly and silently he stepped inside, closing the door quietly behind him, and congratulating himself on his easy entrance. Then for a moment he stood listening. There was no sound but the rattle of a loose window; and, with the reassuring thought that even if the innkeeper should surprise him he had nothing to fear, since he could claim that he was going to take possession of the room that stood reserved for him, he moved forward. He groped his way along the dark passage to the stairs, found them and began the ascent, the slight sounds he made being drowned by the rattling window and the thresh of the rain outside.

In a very little time he was safely on the landing, and guided by the faint light of the window, he made his way to the door of the room

which he had occupied for so brief a time on the previous night. It was closed as he expected ; but lifting the latch carefully he opened the door, slipped inside, and closed it after him. Then he turned round, and as he did so suffered a small shock ; for across the room was a faint red glow which proclaimed a dying fire.

The room then was occupied. He came near to whistling aloud in his surprise, but, checking himself in time, he stood listening, staring in the direction where he knew the bed was. Only dimly could he discern its outline, and he could not even see if anyone lay there ; but of that he had no doubt. Fires are not lit in empty bedrooms at wayside inns, even to air them ; and furthermore, he had a sense of another presence which was better evidence than the fire.

For a moment he did not move. He listened, and at the same time wondered what he should do. Then a sound of light and regular breathing in the room, from which he deduced that the occupant of the bed was sleeping ; and after a little time he decided to carry on. The chest-of-drawers was close at hand. It would take something less than a minute to secure the thing for which he had come ; and once it was in his possession, it would not matter very much if the sleeper in the bed did awake. In two strides he could be at the door, and almost before an alarm could be raised, certainly before it could be answered, he would be out of the house.

Stepping very quietly he moved to the chest,

found it and groped for the top right-hand drawer. He pulled gently, and the perfectly made drawer slid towards him without a sound. Then he felt for the envelope. It was there, the half of it was still covered by the drawer and it was necessary to slide the latter out completely before he could detach the envelope. He did so, secured what he sought; and then deciding that it would be folly to attempt to replace the drawer, determined to put it on the floor. In doing so he let it fall, making a most infernal clatter; and before he could move, the occupant of the bed leaped out and was between him and the door. There followed a faint click, and he was "spotted" by a flash-light, in the beam of which appeared a hand in which a pistol gleamed, then a feminine voice demanded crisply:

"Say, stranger, what's the game?"

He recognized the voice instantly. It belonged to the woman Sadie with whom he had danced at the Medici, and Sadie, as he guessed, might prove a very formidable obstacle to his departure with the envelope. Whilst he was blinking and trying to think of some lie that would explain his intrusion into a lady's bedroom, a little laugh sounded out of the darkness beyond the flash-lamp, and the woman spoke again.

"You, Mr. Melcombe! I'd never have thought it of you! But one never knows. You men are all alike. . . . But what will that lily-of-the-valley Madeline Westley think?"

Melcombe whilst he listened to this raillery watched the hand with the pistol—the only part of the speaker that was really visible. It

was as steady as a rock. Sadie was not the lady to be put out of countenance or suffer from jumpy nerves, because of the discovery of a man in her apartment.

"I'm sorry, Sadie," he answered. "I hadn't an idea you were here!"

"Big boy," she answered in a tone of exaggerated disappointment, "do you mean you weren't looking for this little girl?"

"Honestly, I wasn't," he owned lightly, then explained: "You know this is my room. I left a reserve on it."

"Then that Simple Simon of a landlord has done us both. Knows how to turn the honest dollar, don't he? Lets the apartment to Box and doubles the rent with Cox; and now we're both here at one time. And the bed wasn't built for——"

She broke off sharply, and for a second the light left his face and rested on the drawer at his feet. The next instant it was back in his eyes, and he knew that she had just been talking till she discovered the real purpose of his nocturnal visit. That drawer would no doubt be a revelation and, quick-minded, she might guess why he had come. Very slowly not to attract her attention, he slid his hand to the pocket of his soaked overcoat, and thrust the envelope in. He expected that she would challenge him directly about it, but she did nothing of the kind.

"Say, boy, this hand of mine is kinda tired holding the spot-light. There's a candle on the chair by the bed—and matches. Just kindle it,

illumination will make the meeting more sociable, I guess."

Melcombe saw no reason why he should not oblige her; and with the flash-light following him round and the pistol also, he made his way to the chair, lit the candle and turned to face her.

"Too close, big boy. Just back to the fire-place an' spare my blushes. I ain't dressed for company."

She was as a matter of fact dressed rather ravishingly in flame-coloured pyjamas, and her neck and breast showed dazzlingly white against the daring colour, and whilst her eyes danced with excitement, her cheeks were cool as her manner. But she meant him to obey, he felt that. Standing against the door, slim, almost boyish, and looking much younger than when he had seen her at the Medici; she yet had a resolute air which proclaimed she was not to be trifled with. Melcombe, with a side thought of the man who had entered the inn before himself, obeyed her order, and reaching the fireplace thoughtfully dragged the half-dead ashes together with his foot.

"The damp makes one chilly," he said in explanation of his action.

"No need to apologize," replied Sadie cheerfully. "There's coal in the bucket there. If you like to put a little on the fire—and there are sticks. May as well use 'em. They'll all go down on the bill."

Sticks! Melcombe looked at the bucket she had indicated, and picking up a handful of the chopped wood dropped it on the fire. When he

turned round again the woman was still smiling, but when she spoke next her voice had the ring of steel.

"Spill the truth," she said. "What did you come here for?"

"I told you. I have a reserve on this room ——"

"Shucks!" interposed Sadie rudely.

"Well, you can call the landlord and ask him," said Melcombe, simulating indignation.

"Give him the surprise of his simple life, if I did, I reckon!" Her eyes glanced in the direction of the drawer, then she snapped: "What did you come here to get?"

Melcombe knew that she suspected the truth, and answered airily: "Oh, I left some private correspondence behind me."

"Sure! I thought you might have done. An' it was in that drawer? Gee! No wonder I dreamed love-stuff, an' then blue murder. . . . Better hand it right over, hadn't you, boy?"

"Hand what over?" asked Melcombe, wondering if the woman would shoot if he made a break for the door.

"Oh, can that know-nothing stuff. I'm not a baby-doll. Just get that into your head, and hand over that envelope you came back for; if you want to go out on your two feet."

"You . . . you wouldn't shoot me?" asked Melcombe with a mocking simulation of fear.

"Guess you know right well that I would," answered the woman with a smile. "An' I'd have every justification for homicide. A dame

can defend her honour. An' there's you—a strange man in my room at two in the morning. You ain't a common crook after my jewels; so you must be a ravisher of the innocent—hey?" She laughed lightly at her description of herself, and then added: "Will look well in the news sheets. 'Gent shot in a Bedroom. Lady defends her Honour—with a big H. Boy, you've got to pay for this intrusion, an' you'd better do it quick. I don't want to die of sneezin", an' these Lido pants of mine aren't built for keeping out the draughts."

Melcombe considered the door behind her. If he rushed he had no doubt the woman would fire. He glanced at the chest-of-drawers on which she had set the flash-light. If the room were dark she would scarcely find the thing at the first grab. There would be at least a chance, and apparently she was unaware of the man who had entered the inn and who might be called to her help. He looked from the chest to the candle. If only that were extinguished——

"If you're thinking of a get-away, I'd stop if I were you, Gregory," said the woman. "I'm a dandy shot with an automatic." Her blue eyes were hard, and as he noticed the pistol hand was quite steady. "Better hand over. Horace Westley ain't worth a five-nickel risk. Guess you ain't acquainted with the contents of that envelope you carried off in O'Hara's coat an', if I ain't mistook, came along here to get, are you?"

Melcombe neither owned nor disowned knowledge, and the woman went on:

"They show up Westley for the rotten grafter that he is, for all his pious talk, an' soul-of-honour part he plays, an' they're just dynamite that'll lift the respectable Horace out of his judge's chair, an' send him to Atalanta jail, for longer than he's sent any gunman in his life. . . . You get me? Horace's character is going to be bust to smithereens if what's in that envelope gets into the *Chicago Tribune*, an' the idol of the Drys, the incorruptible bulwark of law an' order, is going to tumble down from his high pedestal with a bang. . . . But that won't happen yet awhile. Horace has a soft streak in him, an' he ain't going to hold out or play no heroic part, when them papers is in certain hands. That ain't his character part. He'll just wilt an' do what's wanted of him."

"What is that?" asked Melcombe, deeply interested.

"Well, there's a man in Chicago coming up before Westley's court—a man with the dollars who can pay for the sort of justice he wants, an' that he's going to get. But the uncorruptible Horace ain't to be bought—having a stack of dollars of his own. But he didn't always have them; an' the secret of how he first come by a full pocket is in that envelope. It ain't a very pretty story, all about big graft an' so on, an' I just won't soil your innocent ears with details. But you can take it that Horace G. is there proved to be the biggest, holiest fraud in the United States; an' him a Christian Scientist! . . . But he knows about them papers. Perelli collected 'em, an' brought 'em along to

England, meaning to get even with Westley some time. Others knew about 'em, including the man who's to go on trial for shootin' a man who tried to blow on him."

"Blow?"

"Blow the gaff; spill the beans," elucidated the lady, and then continued: "Man tried to buy them from Perelli; but Perelli an' he weren't what you'd call bosom pals, an' he said it would be a pleasure to know that the other would be burned in the chair——"

"Burned?"

"Electrocuted! Way they have of putting them off in God's country. Man in question didn't repine at Perelli's notion of brotherly charity. Being a business man he just put up a reward of a hundred thousand dollars for the man that got them papers for him within a month."

"And you are after the hundred thousand?" asked Melcombe, again glancing at the candle.

"Shareholder in the company that will divide," owned Sadie with a light laugh.

Melcombe was intrigued by the story, the essentials of which he never questioned.

"And to get those papers your crowd killed Perelli?"

"No. O'Hara did that, playing a lone hand. But he joined up with us after."

"And you really believe that Westley will do what is wanted if he knows the papers are in the hands of the man you mentioned?"

"Not a scrap of doubt. Man will walk out of court not only free, but exonerated, for

Westley's a spell-binder an' can make black shine like silver. He'll do it like a shot. Every man has his weakness. With some it's dollars, or drink, or women; but with Horace G. it's his pious reputation. Man really treasures it, an' he'll go the limit to keep it unsmirched." The woman laughed. "Queer thing, hey? Talk about the outside of the platter! . . . But you've got the internals of the business now; so you can hand over those documents, an' do no harm to Horace G.—or that white-faced daughter of his."

"I don't think I will!"

"By God, you'd better think again, an' quick!"

"What will you do—if I refuse?"

"Do?" Sadie laughed, a laugh that was like the ringing of steel. "You don't think I'm such a saphead as to let a hundred thousand dollars walk past me, do you?"

"Well, no." Melcombe took off his soaked trilby and wiped his damp forehead. "But you see, Sadie——" He spoke slowly; but he acted quickly. His hat, heavy with moisture, shot out of his hand and whirled across the room. It struck the candle, knocking it over and extinguishing it. In the same second Melcombe leaped to the door. As he did so, the wood he had thrown on the fire crackled into flame. Sadie fired, missing him by a hair, but before she could fire again he knocked the pistol from her hand, and as it fell kicked it away. It slithered under the bed out of reach of both of them, and raging and spitting like a savage cat,

the woman, still before the door, flung herself upon him, clinging, clawing, and winding lissom limbs about him to prevent him making his way out.

CHAPTER XVIII

FLIGHT!

MELCOMBE was at a disadvantage. To fight with a woman, even though the woman had been transformed to a human tigress, was against all his training and principles. He strove to loose her hold, but could not; arms and legs alike clung to him, and he felt like a man in the clutch of an octopus, though he might have walked away carrying her with him without so much as putting a hand to hold her. Then suddenly she loosed one hand and struck at his eyes, twice, blindingly. He reeled back and as he did so felt a hand go to the inner pocket of his coat. So that was it. She was after the envelope and meant to have it at all costs. Well, the time for gentleness was over. Even at the risk of hurting her he must prevent her having her way.

He caught the searching hand, stretched the arm by main force, and thrust it sharply backward. She spat a vile word and jabbed sharply with her head. The jab caught Melcombe on the bridge of his nose, and he reeled back, striking the chest-of-drawers, and releasing the hand he held. The light from the sticks he had thrown on the dying fire lit her face, and he saw

the hard, fierce gleam in her eyes. He saw something else also. The hand he had released went to her hair, fumbled for a second, and came back holding something—a hairpin, as he guessed. A second later, she thrust, again at his eyes. Divining her ferocious purpose, he ducked his head instinctively, and the hairpin ripped his scalp.

She meant to blind him. A great anger mingled with the horror that surged within him at the foul intention, making him ruthless. He gripped both arms and thrust her backward. She spat at him, and clung with her legs ; then unexpectedly the door was thrown open and a man stood in the doorway holding a candle. The woman saw him first.

"Linky!" she gasped. "This guy's . . . got . . . the goods."

She flung herself away from Melcombe, who turning round saw his quondam host at Dartleigh standing in the doorway, candlestick in one hand and a pistol in the other. O'Hara, whose face was pitted with small blood-marks, laughed harshly.

"Got the goods, has he? Well, he'll just hand 'em over, one time or I'll plug him." He advanced into the room. "You hear, my fine bird?" he said, and menaced Melcombe with the pistol. "You've got some papers of mine, and a top-coat——"

"You've one of mine," retorted Melcombe, retreating in the room in the direction of the fireplace. "Exchange is no robbery ; and you will remember it was you that made it."

"A mistake!" said O'Hara with a short laugh. "And we'll rectify it now, or——" He lifted the pistol again, and Melcombe laughed suddenly.

"Oh, you won't shoot!"

The laugh discomposed O'Hara a little, because he did not understand it.

"Won't I? That's where you put your money wrong. I'll shoot like hell——"

"Not before witnesses! Look behind you, man."

O'Hara turned sharply, and Sadie still gasping also looked, to see standing behind them the innkeeper, with his wife in support. Melcombe acted swiftly. His hand went to his pocket, lugged out the envelope, and turning swiftly he dropped it on the fire, where others of the sticks were kindling, and immediately shifted his position slightly, so that his coat, torn open in his recent struggle, concealed the most of the fireplace.

"Whatever be to do?" asked the proprietor of the inn, wide-eyed, as he stared beyond O'Hara at the woman, whose silk attire was in pronounced disorder.

"There's a scoundrel here, who forced his way into this lady's room. A burglar, I expect; but you needn't worry about him. I'll deal with him, make him disgorge, and then we'll tie him up and send word to the police to fetch him in the morning."

"A burglar! Here! My eyes; but that's a stunner. There'm no money to The Stag——"

"It's not money. The man has stolen some

papers from this lady, whom he assaulted, papers worth a fortune, and——"

"Bob-a-dies! It be the gentleman who came along two days back an' went in the night. . . . He'm no burglar. He paid handsome vor his room——"

"Maybe! That's the scoundrel's cunning. It wasn't you he meant to rob. It was this lady."

"But the lady wasn't here," objected the man.

"No, you fool," retorted O'Hara angrily. "That's why he went off; but he came back as soon as he knew she was here. . . . Just you go look out a piece of rope. The rascal ought to be hanged, but we'll tie him up and leave the hanging to the police."

O'Hara's manner was convincing; and Sadie, much dishevelled, the jacket of her pyjama suit badly torn, was more convincing; but the landlord still hesitated. Good man, thought Melcombe, and rejoiced as he caught a crackle of wood in the fireplace and felt a sudden accession of heat. If only the honest man would delay matters half a minute longer, he could fetch all the rope in the world. The man obliged.

"What I d'want to know be, what have the man got to say vor hisself?"

"Nothing. But he'll say it to the police come morning, I'll wager. Toddle along for that rope."

The farmer toddled; and his wife followed to help him to find the rope. O'Hara looked at Melcombe and grinned.

"The land makes for simplicity, hey? . . . But now's your chance, my fine bird. Hand over those documents, and you can walk out of the street door before old Hayseeds comes back."

Melcombe did not move. He stood with his feet apart, hands behind him, as if he were on his own hearthstone. And he met the other's angry eyes calmly.

"Sorry not to oblige. The truth is, I haven't got them."

"Ananias!" spat Sadie. "They were in that drawer there. He as good as owned it. And he hasn't been out of the apartment."

O'Hara's face grew dark, and his eyes took a sudden stormy look.

"Hand them over, by God—or——"

He took a sharp step forward as if he meant to enforce his will, then he stopped, the blackness vanished, and he chuckled.

"No need for third-degree stuff. Peaceful persuasion will do the trick. When Hayseeds has helped to rope you, I'll just lift what belongs to me."

"I thought they were Perelli's," said Melcombe, to keep the man's attention a moment longer.

"No! They're mine."

"By right of conquest, hey? That's why you shot Perelli, that you might steal——"

He broke off as he caught the look on the other's face—a look quite different from any that had hitherto been there. His eyes concentrated themselves on Melcombe, and took a

cold set stare. His mouth hardened suddenly ; and a second later he made an odd gesture.

" You think I shot Perelli ? "

" Who else ? " asked Melcombe quietly.

" Gee ! You're a cool one, aren't you ? "

Melcombe did not feel very cool at the moment. He was as a matter of fact very warm—but as he watched O'Hara his blood chilled suddenly and he gave a little shiver. O'Hara was a killer ; and in that moment he looked it. Melcombe read the man's thought as clearly as if it had been set down in print. It had come to him quite suddenly that Melcombe was the one witness whose testimony would suffice to hang him for Perelli's murder ; and in the same second he had decided that the testimony should never be given. Melcombe knew well enough the motives that moved men to murder, and knew that self-preservation was one of the most powerful. His life from that moment was in jeopardy. Having killed, O'Hara would kill again to hide the earlier crime. Of that he had no doubt whatever. The man's set face and the cold passion of those staring eyes told him the truth. Then there was a sound of feet on the stairs, and O'Hara spoke again.

" Here's that old rube with the rope. Hand out that envelope and you can run, fool."

Melcombe made no response. He knew the uselessness of it. The envelope with its contents must by this be white ash ; and in any case he knew that once out in the rainy darkness, O'Hara, merciless, would be at his heels like a questing beast. The innkeeper, with a coil of

rope over his arm, reached the doorway; and O'Hara snapped peremptorily:

"Tie him up! I'll hold him with the gun."

The man advanced into the room, and then Melcombe, to create a diversion, spoke.

"You really want that envelope?"

"Fair perishing for it," replied O'Hara eagerly.

Melcombe stepped aside from the fire and pointed. "Well, there it is!"

For a second apparently the other did not comprehend; then the truth came on him in a flood. He strode across the room and looked into the fire. Outlined in curling ash, white and grey, was the envelope.

"Christ!" he bellowed. "You've diddled us!"

He whirled round with an arm upraised, and before Melcombe could move, the arm, swift as lightning, came down, the barrel of the pistol in the man's hand crashing on his head with terrific force. He crumpled under the blow and without a cry fell to the floor in a huddled heap, utterly unconscious.

The innkeeper cried out in horror and O'Hara turned on him.

"Shut your face!" he said ferociously, and as the man backed from him in terror, he asked suddenly: "You got a flivver?"

"Fliv-flivver!" stammered the innkeeper. "What . . . what be——"

"A car, you bonehead!"

"No-o."

"Got a hoss?"

" Ess ! "

" An' a buggy—trap-cart ? "

" There'm the li'l market cart——"

" Then harness up, as quick as you know how."

" But . . . what . . . w-where——"

" I'm going for the police. . . . Jump now ! There's no time to waste."

The innkeeper departed hurriedly, and O'Hara swung round to the woman.

" This game's busted, Sadie ! . . . It's time for the get-away ! "

The woman lifted a finger and listened. " In a trap—in this weather. We'll be melted like candy-dolls. It's raining Noah's flood. Better go get the flivver. It'll be heaps quicker too."

" Flivver's out of running. Two tyres cut. That guy or another was too smart for us. Pony an' gig's the only thing. Can't wait here till morning an' take a chance. . . . There's no graft with the lawyers this side—an' you can't get past the hangman by planting a handful of grands."

A subtle change came in the woman's eyes. She knew all about the reputation of the English courts, and remembered something about the law's attitude to accessories.

" Well, I'll wish you a clean get-away ! " she said.

" Meaning you ain't coming ? "

Sadie calmly reached for an intimate garment hung upon the bed-rail as if she contemplated dressing.

" Perelli's your funeral—not mine ! " she

answered slowly. "An' this one too." She walked across the floor trailing the garment, and looked down at Melcombe, then touched him with her naked toe. "Carrion, I reckon," she commented. "You do sure hit hard, Linky, and you'd better go on your lonesome. Hoss will carry one faster than two; an' I'll give Sacco and the others the office to clear. . . . Get me?"

"Yes," growled the man.

"Then that's settled. . . . See you later—in Chicago. Say ten days. . . . But what's happened to your face, Linky? It's all pitted and bloody."

"One of the crowd let off a scatter-gun—curse him."

"Um! I'd take a swill before I went if I were you. The thing's noticeable. Might help the cops to mark you."

"I will," said the man, and turning on his heel left the room.

As he went Sadie made an indescribable gesture, and closed the door after him. Then she stooped over Gregory Melcombe and put a hand on his heart.

"Ticking yet," she whispered. "But I'm not grieving because O'Hara gave you that sock."

She straightened herself and went a little nearer the fire, slipped out of her night attire, and calmly began to dress. Before she had finished she heard the clash of hoofs outside, and going to the window, looked down. A horse and trap stood at the door, and by the light of

the oil lamps she saw O'Hara climb into the vehicle and drive away in the rain. She watched him go with enigmatic eyes.

" See you later—in Chicago," she repeated to herself. " I'll lay a handful of dollars I never do. Hell is more likely."

She moved from the window and continued her dressing. The innkeeper's heavy steps came up the stairs and across the landing to her door, and there followed a knock.

" Come in," she said, and as the man opened the door, indicated Melcombe. " That guy ain't dead. Get your wife to help you an' put him in bed there. It's his turn ; and I've had mine. I'm going for a doctor."

" Doctor ! There bain't one nearer than Dunster. Ee'll never be able to make it in this foul weather."

" Wrong ! There's one at that what-d'-you-call-it house."

" Shapgate."

" Yes ! Queer names you have in this country, for sure. There's a friend of mine—medical—there, as I was telling you. I'm fetching him. Better strip that boy, he's soaking ; and put a hot bottle to his feet. Give him brandy. He's a concussion case. . . . I'll be back in two shakes with the doctor."

She rummaged in a small suitcase, selected small personal articles and crammed them in a hand-bag ; then when the man had called his wife, she went downstairs—opened the door, and stepped out into the night. For a moment she hesitated, looked in the direction of Dunster

as if contemplating that direction, then turned her face to Shapgate. Gangdom had its code. Desertion was one of its heinous crimes; and to be put on the spot when she reached her native heath did not appeal to her as a happy ending to a life story.

And as it chanced virtue was rewarded. She had gone less than five hundred yards when the lights of a car came into view. When it was almost level, it pulled up sharply.

"Sadie," shouted a man's voice.

"That's me!" she said, recognizing Sacco. "And here's a lucky meeting. I was coming to warn you. This game has gone rotten on our hands—petered out."

"How?" demanded Sacco.

"Want me to melt? I'll come in and tell you."

She told her tale succinctly, in the picturesque language of the Cicero quarter, and as she ended Sacco growled an oath.

"An' it was there all the time."

"Under a drawer!"

"But I did comb every drawer," said the Italian perplexedly.

"Didn't comb fine enough, I reckon. Anyway, I've given you gospel; an' I guess we'd better travel whilst the going's good."

"Christopher, yes! We will go to London as the bee flies. A good thing we have the flivver."

"I thought it had two tyres down. That was O'Hara's yarn."

"It had, but we pinched two others from Westley's car, an' fitted 'em."

"Lucky they were there to pinch. But keep a bright look out in front. O'Hara is ahead with a trap."

"O'Hara——" The man swore harshly. "We ain't shedding no tears about him. He started on his lonesome; and he's back to it. If he tried to pile into this car I'd gun him. I ain't anxious to be mixed up with that Perelli business—not in this country. They're too durn particular about a stiff or so."

They drove on through the rain. Presently the headlights picked out the pony and trap ahead. The driver made his Klaxon shriek, and Lincoln O'Hara drew aside to let the car pass. As it did so he saw the number of it, and guessing that he was being deserted by the others, swore horribly; then lashed the horse forward unmercifully, not with any hope of overtaking the car, but because in his ears he heard the beating of death's wings, and was half mad with fear.

CHAPTER XIX

THE LUCKY MAN

AT Shapgate everyone waited anxiously for Melcombe's return, Hamilton and Lord Bobby with such philosophy as they could muster; Madeline Westley with a growing anxiety that was concerned with the welfare of Melcombe alone; and her father with a mounting apprehension which was rooted in the possibility that the man who had gone forth had failed in his purpose.

There was no sign of active hostilities from the watchers outside. The headlights of the car down the road were turned on, and now and again the figures of men crossed the zone of light, plainly engaged in some definite task.

"Wonder what the game is now?" said Hamilton, and Bobby had an inspiration.

"Those tyres I punctured—they're mending them, I guess." He laughed. "Well, I don't envy them the job in the darkness."

They watched the men closely from the upper window; whilst in the kitchen Madeline Westley stared in the fire, with fears pricking her imagination to efforts by which they themselves were fed. Remembering the character of the men who were her father's enemies, as

the time passed on without bringing Melcombe, she was almost in despair. She conceived her lover lying out in the rain, shot by those men who were ruthless as tigers ; or trapped in the inn and tortured by them to make him reveal the whereabouts of that envelope which was the cause of all this trouble. And she was aware of a stirring of resentment against her father, who paced the kitchen, concerned not at all for Melcombe's welfare, but only for the success of his mission.

" That young man must get those papers," he cried to her once, in a sudden access of fear. " He must—or I am ruined ; undone ; a pariah in my native land."

Once or twice in his perambulations he had given utterance to similar things, of which the girl had taken little notice ; but now, with the resentment of his selfish attitude active within her, she was moved to a question which was not dictated by sympathy.

" What is there in those papers that you should be so afraid ? Something disgraceful ? "

Westley, conscious of the faint note of hostility in her tones, stopped dead, and looked at her with surprise in his eyes.

" The . . . the matter in the papers is private," he said shortly.

" And shameful ? " she asked—her voice hardening.

" Why do you ask that ? " he almost snapped.

" It is natural to draw the conclusion—from the way you talk. . . . If I had known that at the beginning——"

She did not complete the sentence, but Westley apparently understood. He made one of his platform gestures.

"Ingrate!" he said. "And my own flesh and blood! Ah, how true Shakespeare speaks! 'Tis sharper than a serpent's tooth to have a thankless child.' He knew! He knew!"

There was another gesture, expressive of the suffering caused by such baseness, but the girl ignored it; and her resentment grew sevenfold.

"I wonder if he also expected everything and everyone to be sacrificed on the altar of his vanity, or if sometimes he gave a thought to others?"

Horace G. Westley was momentarily too overcome to do anything but stare at her dazedly. He was like a man who had suffered what was perilously near a knock-out. He gasped for breath, and temporarily the spring of his fluent speech was damned. Then he croaked hoarsely.

"What—what has come to you, girl?"

She did not look at him as she answered. "Revelation, I suppose."

"Revelation!" For a second or two the man was staggered again. Then he saw light. "Ah," he broke out, "you and that young man opened that envelope, read those papers. I might have expected it. The itch of curiosity, I suppose. A most dishonourable thing, most dishonourable; to pry into secrets like any kitchen-maid, to——"

Madeline's face was flaming, she was shaken by a great indignation; but before she could

give expression to it there was a sound of hurried feet in the hall, and the door was thrown open, revealing Lord Bobby, in a state of great excitement.

"Those beggars have gone!" he fairly shouted.

"Gone!" echoed Westley, his face an index of various emotions.

"Quit! Vamoosed! They repaired the car I damaged. Anyway, they're gone off in it, towards Dunster and——"

"God in heaven!" cried Westley in a voice that betrayed utter despair.

Lord Bobby looked at him curiously. "You didn't want them to keep hanging round, did you?"

"No! No! But can't you see? If they have gone—Melcombe has failed. Something has befallen him; they have those papers, and I——"

The gesture might have made the fortune of a tragedian; but Bobby Medway never saw it.

"Melcombe! My stars! You're right! They've got him!"

"And my papers!"

"Oh, blast your papers, man!" cried Lord Bobby rudely, and ran from the room to find Hamilton.

"Teddy," he explained, "something's happened to Melcombe. Must have or those wolves would never have chucked their watch. I'm going to find out. We can't leave Powder in the lurch. You look after that orator and the girl. I'll bring news as soon as I have it."

Hamilton made no attempt to dissuade him, but gave him counsel.

"Go cautious, Bobby! Remember what those fellows are. Don't be reckless."

"Reckless! Me! Teddy, you're a duffer. I'm the steadiest one on the job."

He proved it by going without hat and coat, and regardless of anyone or anything likely to be on the road, sprinting most of the way to The Stag. When he came in sight of the inn, he slackened his pace and reconnoitred whilst he recovered his breath. There was a light in an upper window, the door of the inn was shut, and the place seemed quiet enough; with no sign of the men who had departed in the car, and none of the man he sought. The very quiet seemed ominous, and oppressed him with a sense of foreboding. He took a deep breath and marched up to the inn door. He tried the latch; it lifted, and the door opened. He stared into the dark passage, and as he did so heard a voice on the stairs.

"Dear! Dear! How long that maid be gone vor the doctor, vor sure!"

At that, Lord Bobby shouted to make his presence known, and as the innkeeper appeared, began to ascend the stairs. The man stared at him in amazement, as well he might, for Bobby's flaxen hair was plaistered down with wet, his clothes were dripping, and he was splashed from head to foot with mud. The man had not time to speak, however, for his new caller asked breathlessly:

"Mr. Melcombe? Is he here?"

"Ah, you'm the doctor, at last."

"Doctor!" Bobby's heart sank. "Where is he?"

"In there." The man indicated the bedroom.

Lord Bobby wasted no time in questions. He walked into the room, and his eyes went straight to the bed, beside which an elderly woman sat in the attitude of a watcher of the sick. Melcombe lay there very pale, eyes closed, unconscious, breathing very feebly. He looked like a dying man, and into Bobby's heart surged a great fear.

"You'm the doctor," asked the woman, "that young lady went for?"

"Doctor, no! . . . What lady?—what has happened?" He looked round the room, saw Sadie's discarded pyjamas on the floor, the suitcase, hurriedly ransacked, the drawer wrong side up, and dimly divined the truth. "What has happened?" he asked. "Quick, tell me. I am this gentleman's friend."

"Oh, there've been terr'ble doings on in this house this night," began the woman, and Bobby with such patience as he could muster listened to the slowly-told tale, making mental notes as it progressed. "Sadie, of course. Sleeping here, and Powder walked in on her. . . . Surprised by one of those scoundrels—O'Hara. And burned that d——d envelope under his nose. . . . Was clubbed with a pistol. Concussion! That's the trouble."

He looked at the unconscious man, and as he did so, saw a half-bottle of brandy on the floor.

"Lord," he groaned, "you didn't give him that stuff?"

"No!" said the woman. "The young lady said we was to; but us didn't. Ee zee, once my husband falled from a hoss, and was like this gentleman, and the doctor said as how brandy was death, so we changed our minds——"

"Thank God! You'd have killed him. What have you done?"

"Hot-water bottle to his feet, an' warm blankets, all that we did for my man when——"

"Good! . . . Where's the nearest doctor? That young woman's name is Sapphira, which is to say, liar. There's none at Shapgate to-night."

"Dunster, zur."

Lord Bobby swore. "That's miles. Have you a horse?"

"Ess, but the man what did this went off with it. But there'm a bicycle ov my bwoy's—he's in the navy——"

"Show me it." He turned to the innkeeper. "I'm going for the doctor, right off."

The innkeeper led the way downstairs, and to an outhouse. A cycle was slung from the rafters. Its tyres were slack, but, as he proved inside a couple of minutes, only needed pumping.

"A lamp——" he began, but the innkeeper already had it in hand, and a small tin of carbide.

"Water?" said Bobby tersely, and began to prepare the lamp. Seven minutes later he wheeled the cycle to the front of the house and was in the act of mounting when a shadowy figure came through the rain towards him.

Instantly he swung the cycle round so that its light fell on the newcomer. He was prepared for trouble and instead suffered a surprise.

"Miss Westley!" he cried in amazement.

"I had to come," she said. "He is here. Something told me. . . . He is . . . he is . . ."

"Knocked out!" explained Bobby softly. "Concussion by the look of things. I'm going for the doctor. Don't worry too much, Miss Westley. Powder has a thick head. He'll pull through this, you'll see; and I'll be best man for him yet. . . . Don't let him be disturbed. I'm no St. John's man, but I know that much. Now I'm off."

He mounted the cycle and rode off in the rain and darkness, and as he did so Madeline turned to the innkeeper.

"Where is he? Take me to him. . . . I shall stay."

She went to the disordered room, fought down the panic which assailed her as she saw her lover in such an evil case, and then seated herself by the watching woman's side and heard in whispers the story of the night at the inn.

"There was an envelope with papers, the other wanted," said the woman, "an'——"

"What happened to it?" asked Madeline, with an interest that had less to do with the results for her father than with the action of her lover.

"He"—the woman nodded towards the bed —"burned it, which was why the other struck en down."

The girl thought a little bitterly that when he

got that news her father would be his own man again, and would care little for anything else; and then as the story concluded sat in silence, watching, waiting, praying for the speedy arrival of the doctor. Before the latter arrived, however, there was a change in the patient. His skin became warmer; the pulse which the woman felt from time to time became stronger; there was a flickering of the eyelids, then a sudden violent retching, the precursor of sickness. Madeline was alarmed, but the woman reassured her.

"Best thing that could happen. 'Twas zo with my man. He'll be better after."

It was as she said, and presently Melcombe opened his eyes in full consciousness, and saw Madeline by his side. He smiled a little wanly and tried to lift himself; but the woman stopped him hastily.

"Bide still, zur, vor the Lord's sake, or——"

The warning was scarcely needed. Melcombe sank back on the pillows, eyes closed and head reeling, but a little while later he spoke.

"I burned—the envelope—Madeline!"

"Oh, I know. My dear! My dear!" whispered the girl. "Don't talk. It is dangerous! I shall be here . . . shut your eyes."

"Your hand."

She gave it him; and as his eyes closed again, she gave voiceless thanks to heaven, and waited . . . waited for Lord Bobby's return with better heart. A whole two hours after she heard a car stop outside, then Lord Bobby's voice on the stairs, and the doctor came into the room. He

had already heard what had happened, and asked only questions relating to the patient's condition, and after a brief examination spoke the words which set the girl's mind at rest.

"He will do. Nothing better could have been done. But he must be kept quiet—very quiet—no excitement . . . no mental exertion, you understand!"

"Oh, yes, yes!"

And when presently the doctor went, Lord Bobby grinned reassuringly.

"What did I tell you, Miss Westley! Thick head an' all that you know! . . . A skull like that is a gift. . . . Now mine——" He fingered his still wet poll, thoughtfully, and then grinned again, and in spite of everything, Madeline was moved to smile.

* * * * *

Morning brought Horace G. Westley along; his own man again, for Lord Bobby had carried all the news at breakfast-time.

"You stay to nurse him," he said in his characteristic way. "That is what I should expect of my daughter; and I entirely approve. I owe him much—much! How much he will never know! Presently, after a certain event, I expect to be run for the State Governorship, and after that—who knows? There is the top rung of all. But that is to anticipate, and it is well to be not too ambitious. What does Shakespeare say?"—Shakespeare was made to say it; and then was challenged. "I am not sure that he was right; but we shall see, yes, we shall see. . . . When you return we will talk of that——"

"I am not sure I shall return," said Madeline quietly.

"Not return." Mr. Westley for the moment was too staggered to say more. He stared at her doubtfully, his mind busy with reasons for such a decision that he dared scarcely have put into words; and for the moment seeing himself through his daughter's candid eyes.

"No," answered Madeline quietly. "I expect I shall marry."

Mr. Westley's self-esteem lifted up its head again. He radiated benevolence.

"I need not ask the name of the happy man. I am glad he is to have his reward—and a reward that is more than commensurate with the service. You will let me know the date of the auspicious occasion?"

"Yes—if you want it."

"My dear child!" he protested; and then looked at his watch. "I have to hurry. There is a boat from Southampton to-morrow; and I must go to London first. I have sent for a car—— Ah! I believe—yes! Here it is. Good-bye, my dear. My gratitude to Gregory. If it were not medically inadvisable, I would see him in person, but no doubt he will prefer you."

And with a waving handkerchief at the window, Horace G. Westley went to pursue his honourable way.

* * * * *

It was a whole ten days later when Melcombe, convalescing at The Metropole, Minehead, received a visit from his two friends, and heard the rest of the story in which he had played so

strenuous a part. Hamilton was the spokesman in answer to the invalid's question.

"Yes! We got O'Hara. He left that horse and trap to wander outside Dulverton, and at daylight bought a motor-cycle and made for Folkestone. He crossed, and went down to Cherbourg to get a White Star boat. He was two days ahead of the sailing, and we had track of him all the way. Railton and I crossed over and gathered him on the boat. He showed fight; and blustered a little. He means to fight the charge, but was a little shaken when he heard you would be able to testify. We've got Sacco too, and are holding him as an accessory; the others are still running wide, but Sadie is in Holloway—detained on suspicion."

"Not of connection with Perelli's death?"

"No; she definitely wasn't in that, and I fancy there'll be no formal charge unless you make one. You might——"

"No," said Melcombe emphatically. "Let her go—for me."

He frowned, and then the frown lifted and a quick light came in his eyes. Hamilton followed the direction of them and saw Madeline just entering the lounge. Then he laughed.

"In a week, I understand?"

"Yes? . . . an eternity," answered Melcombe, laughing back.

"Nothing to the eternity that will follow," chaffed Lord Bobby. "You'll find marriage infernally dull after your courtship. Is the honourable parent coming to present the bride to her husband?"

"No, he——"

"Heaven is merciful sometimes!" said Bobby piously. "If he were my father-in-law I should gag him. But——" He rose with the others, as Madeline obviously happy drew near, then he laughed, and under his breath whispered:

"You're a lucky dog, Powder!"

And Melcombe, meeting Madeline's eyes, knew that he was right.

THE END